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A letter from Santa

It breaks my heart when Dylan asks when Daddy's coming to visit, or why he hasn't Skyped this week. And Christmas just makes things even worse

My mother's coming for Christmas, ho ho ho... We have a cranky Steptoe & Daughter relationship, which sounds more knockabout than it is. Actually, I've been a disappointment — divorced single mum, various casual jobs on the go, none of them 'white collar'. Going on past festive visits, she'll sit there hogging the remote so that me and Dylan don't get a look-in, telling me what a lovely boy Aled Jones is as she watches him duet with a cathedral choir.

Come to think of it, one of my main failings is that I married the opposite of Aled Jones, as far as Mum's concerned (not that she's met the Welsh warbler).

"Nat's IT job is very white collar," I tend to point out in a defensive moment. "You can't fault his ambition."

"And look where that got you."
I kind of see her point. His

has always been the restless ambition of looking to move on to a better class of job — and wife. It's the fact he's so bad at keeping in touch with Dylan that really rankles, especially at Christmas.

Not that Mum's cruel, just unthinkingly handy with the pearls of wisdom, a verbal deftness that extends to letting herself off the hook. Last year, when I found her making inroads in the sherry before 11am, she said, "To quote Oscar Wilde, 'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm looking at you still in your nightie. You'll have to get dressed before lunch."

"Oscar who?" asks my colleague Lucas when (unwisely) I share this anecdote at work.

"Oscar Wilde," I repeat patiently. "A famous writer."

"As famous as J. K. Rowling?"
"Possibly not, though it depends who you ask."

"The youth of today," says our supervisor Brendan, when Lucas has shuffled back to his

desk. "Now, are you coming to the office Christmas party?"

I glance around the 'office', which consists of us three. "We're a bit low on numbers for a party."

"It's not here, it's over the road at the main office. Free booze, a Bonnie Tyler tribute act and a

if that's the real clincher.

"That's because he probably thinks Bonnie Tyler is an attractive Scottish roofer. You see what I did there?"

"I did. I'll think about the party, Bren. Thanks for the tea."

We certainly are an odd trio here at the seasonal HQ of Dear Santa, an outpost of the local sorting office. Lucas and I are temps, Brendan seconded from the main HQ over the road to keep an eye on us. We receive and process the sacks of mail marked *Care of the North Pole*. Where an address is enclosed with the letter, we fill in a pro-forma template confirming receipt, add a vaguely personalised comment acknowledging that Santa will do his best to provide, print it off, plonk on a reindeer-hoof stamp and send back as a reply. Some of the letters make me sad (that's Christmas for you). Most are written in school, luckily, as Dylan's was, and therefore reach us having been subtly supervised (no asking for the return of lately departed grandparents or hamsters or any other request that might tax Santa's jaunty response style).

Naturally, I've kept my work a secret from Dylan, casually offering to 'post' his letter to Santa, than watching his face when he opened the reply and held it up to show me Rudolph's hoof stamp. Does wonders

— “ —
We receive and process the mail, marked 'Care of the North Pole'

raffle for a hamper. C'mon, Debbie, it'll be a blast!" He plonks a mug of tea on my desk and I grunt, "I'll think about it. You going?" I call across the office to the youthful Lucas, who merely shakes his head and lowers it towards his screen.

"See?" I say to Brendan.
"Lucas isn't going." As





for your inner Grinch, I s'pose.

"Why aren't you wearing your deely-bopper antlers?" Brendan asks before he returns to his own desk.

"They were giving my ears gyp. Sorry."

He goes off with his own antlers drooping slightly and (of course) I feel guilty. I wanted to tell him that I was too fed up with Nat to enter into the festive spirit. Since the divorce, he was supposed to pay electronically into an account every month, but there have been endless delays, glitches and excuses. I really need to pin him down

and discuss it, which would be a lot easier if he wasn't staying in Dubai for Christmas...

Not that I want him around, but Dylan's a different matter. Breaks my heart (what's left of it) when Dylan asks when Daddy's coming to visit, or why he hasn't Skyped this week, like he promised. Takes all my resolve not to reply, "Because Daddy is a careless, selfish, immature berk. Better to be disappointed early doors, kiddo, than nurture false expectations of your old man for years to come."

What would I ask Santa for, I wonder, reaching for the hoof

stamp? For Git-chops to pay regular alimony and remember he has a son please, Santa. Not a lot to ask for, is it? I've been a good girl this year.

Suddenly, everything is blurry.

Lucas looks busier than usual in his corner, while Brendan comes over with another mug of disgusting tea to ask, "What's up? You can tell me."

So I tell him that Dylan's dad is swerving a visit home this Christmas because he wants to try out the new set of golf clubs his teeny, tiny new wifey bought as a one-year anniversary present, and he suggested

instead that "maybe Dylan can come out and see us in the new year."

"Not me, of course!" I rage. "I'm supposed to put my six-year-old son on a plane and send him off to be treated as an experiment in childcare by the original birdbrain. That's my nickname for Nat's new wife," I mutter. "Real name, Karen."

"You're angry, and rightly so," says Brendan carefully. "But it does no good to rage from afar at the new partner. We inflate them in our imaginations as these two-dimensional home-wreckers, but when the dust

A letter from Santa

settles, we have to get on for the child's sake."

Is he speaking from experience? Have I been so wrapped up in myself that I've been incurious about his own life or forgotten the details? "Alison and I didn't have kids," Bren muses, staring out of the tiny window above my desk. "That was about the only saving grace when we split." He squares his shoulders. "She left me for someone higher up the postal food chain. 'Too high falutin' to lick her own stamps,' my mother says."

Oh God, he's got a mother who sounds like mine, except that the euphemism may be her preferred method of telling it like it is. I nod, blow my nose and say, "You've got a point there, Bren. Although, just for the record, Birdbrain is still a home-wrecking bimbo."

"That's taken as read. Think about the party. It's next Thursday."

I make my way home later that evening with my coat wrapped up around my ears, and spot a figure on the dark street ahead of me. It's Lucas, loping along in skinny jeans and a bomber jacket. There's something in the vulnerable cast to his shoulders that makes me call, "Lucas, wait up!"

He stops reluctantly. He's a funny-looking kid, all angles, but there's something untethered about him that makes me think 'broken home' and then makes me dwell joltingly on Dylan in years to come. I'm sure broken homes don't officially exist any more; they're probably lightly fractured or something. The terminology of heartbreak changes.

"Where are you going?" I ask foolishly when I catch up. My query catches us both unawares with its open-ended tone and he looks startled, then points down the street. "That way."

I don't know what lies "that way", but I ask where he lives.

"There." He points again, in the vague direction of town, but he is blushing. He's clutching a bag by its paper handle; I can smell the cheeseburger inside.

So much for sustenance, but he must be over 18 (or as near as dammit) and I'm not his mother and he's looking increasingly uncomfortable...

I say, "I'm heading t'other way towards the bus stop, so get

— “ —
I double-back and stalk him, my suspicions confirmed when he turns back

home safe, I'll see you tomorrow," and I jog off — but this is only a ruse.

Don't ask me why, but I double-back and stalk him, my suspicions confirmed when he turns back and returns to the office we've just vacated, lets himself in with a key card (stolen? cloned? I know Brendan only had two to give out and I've got the other one) and nips back up the dark stairwell to our cubbyhole of an office. He probably nips back onto the street at intervals to dodge the cleaner or security man. He must be sleeping on mail sacks in the dark. Maybe he surfs the net at his desk, although the flickering blue screen might draw attention.

And I'm pretty sure they turn the heating off overnight.

Should I tell Brendan to have a word? Tactful concern might be better coming from a bloke. Maybe Brendan could even put him up for the duration. Bren's only got a one-bed flat, though (I do recall him telling me that), but I couldn't take Lucas in, what with Mum coming in a few days, a tree to lug indoors, presents to wrap...

I let myself in through the office doors with my own key card and tiptoe up to the cubbyhole. Lucas has his head on his desk, resting on a small pile of junk mail next to a half-eaten burger, a toiletry bag and a folded towel. The holdall I glimpse under his desk must contain clothes. He probably stashes it in the cupboard behind him during the day.

As soon as he spots me, he jumps up in alarm.

"Look," I say, "I'm not being nosy or judging, but why not come home with me? I've got a room going spare. Well, when I say 'room,' I mean a space the size of a walk-in cupboard, but it's got a bed. And when I say 'bed,' it's more of a kind of a lilo effort with a slow puncture..."

He starts to smile as I try to talk myself out of my own act of charity.

"Thank you, let me think about it." His pale skin mottles again. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"Truth is, I don't really want to leave you here, Lucas. Doesn't the heating go off? That holdall doesn't look big enough to hold a sleeping bag."

"It's quite cosy, honest."

We face each other. Stalemate.

"Tell you what," he says at last. "I could come to you on Christmas Day — and even stay the night, if you like."

He makes it sound as if he's doing me a favour, but I tread carefully because the worst thing you can do (I once read) is make it sound the other way round. I want to stay and argue the toss about him coming with me right now, but he starts to edge me back towards the exit so I say, "Let's shake on it."

That way, at least I know he won't spend Christmas Day alone.

"Don't tell Brendan," he pleads, shaking hands.

"Bren would understand," I assure him.

"Yeah. Not sure I do, though. Don't want it explained to me. Promise you won't tell him?"

I have to smile then, because he's nailed Brendan to a T: he was very good at understanding me as well and letting me know it, when there's actually a childish part of everyone that just wants to hear, "The hussy! I'd scratch Birdbrain's eyes out, if I were you!"

"I promise," I say.

So I leave Lucas to it and go home, and try to think of being a bit nicer to people.

Next day, Lucas acts as if butter wouldn't melt, but he comes over to me when Brendan's not around and asks a few questions about Nat and Dylan, and I begin to sense that his issues lie with his own family.

"Do they know where



you are?" I ask him gently.

He shakes his head, adding unexpectedly "But I've stayed close, in a way. We had a row..." He puffs out his cheeks. "Things get worse at home this time of year. Really fraught."

'Don't I know it,' I thought. Mum was bound to find my rustic twiggery in the front room a poor substitute for the whopping spruce Aled sang *O Holy Night* in front of last year.

"Don't forget Christmas Day," I remind Lucas. "Come as early as you like. You'll be doing me a favour."

But the following Wednesday, there's no sign of Lucas at work. Brendan is very annoyed. "The youth of today. I stuck my neck out for him."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, he was hanging around the entrance to the office just before I took you on, asking if I had any work, so I gave him a trial without going through the proper channels of an agency of anything. He didn't have a home address to put on his application form, so I never got him to fill one in officially or told HR about him, and I paid him cash-in-hand, seeing as we had the budget for a third person." He pulls a face. "Might have landed myself in hot water with the cash-in-hand thing, but I wanted to give the kid a break. He seemed a bit of a lost soul."

I wonder then if I should tell him about Lucas sleeping in the office after hours. But a promise is a promise, and Lucas might still come to mine on Christmas Day. Still, it was good of Brendan to stick his neck out like that. It's the measure of the man.

In the meantime, we both worry where Lucas is now and if he's going to be all right. I look for him on my way home, frustrated with my own limitations.

Thursday afternoon, the powers that be allow everyone to go home early to prepare for the party. I mutter insincerely to Brendan that I might see him later, then scuttle home to soak my feet and prepare for a quiet night in with the telly.

I collect Dylan from the childminder's and when I open the front door, he's the first to notice the envelope on the mat.



"Look, Mum!" He picks it up excitedly. "You've got a letter from Santa!"

Hmm. While there's no postage stamp, I recognise that hoof-mark on the back flap. I hope Brendan hasn't been

— “ —
Evidently, it was every present Nat had ever put on his wish list to Santa

hand-delivering me *billets-doux*. I open it while Dylan's taking off his coat. It's handwritten, not pre-printed in a jolly font like the ones we send out.

Dear Debbie, I wanted to write and thank you for your kindness to our dear son, Claus Junior, which he has told us all about. Just by being there for him, you gave him the time he needed to think things through and come on home to us. We're so grateful. Just to let you know, I have also written to Git-chops, reminding him of all the times he wrote to me, promising he would 'Never ever ask for another thing' as long as he got a yellow Meccano set

(1983), a BMX bike (1984), Optimus Prime Transformer (1985)... Here the list was so long that I had to skim it. Evidently, it was every present Nat had ever put on his wish list to Santa.

In conclusion, I have reminded Git-chops of all that he owes me and made it clear I shall be asking for everything back (including this year's set of Arnold Palmer golf clubs) if he doesn't start paying you properly each month, Skyping when agreed and stop being a selfish, immature berk who puts himself first. Should he be in any doubt as to my identity, my letter to him adds a few references to the 'ultimate fantasy wish list' he has so far left unexpressed to others, but which he has been gradually adding to since he was a little boy.

Hopeful that he will start to make immediate amends, may I wish you a very happy Christmas. Yours, in the spirit of the season,

Claus Senior, CEO Wishes Inc
 Lucas, I realised with a start, was an anagram of Claus. And working in Dear Santa HQ had been his way of keeping close to home! I put down the letter. Could CEO Claus really be claiming credit for all the gifts I'd bought Dylan, and all the gifts mums and dads had bought their own children down the years?

There was another way of looking at it, of course.

I'd landed the job at the post office just when I needed an

income boost for pressies. And Mum once confessed that she used to buy Christmas presents during the year and hide them around the house, enjoying the thrill of finding an expensive toy marked down in some out-of-the-way shop where the owner didn't know its value to a little girl... Maybe there is no workshop full of elves, but rather Claus Senior moving in mysterious ways throughout the year. Well, it's a thought.

Dylan asks, jumping up and down. "What did Santa say in the letter, Mum?"

"He says I've been a good girl, so my present is on its way."

"I didn't know grown-ups got wanted wishes by Santa too."

"Oh, yes." I nod as the phone starts to ring. "Even grown-ups have wish lists, it's just that sometimes the present isn't under the tree. You were always on my wish list, for a start."

Dylan's eyes light up. "Was I?"

"You bet. Best one I ever got."

I move towards the ringing phone, wondering if this is Nat and, if so, will he be contrite, angry, sheepish? Probably all three. 'Tis the season, though, to hear him out.

Then maybe I'll give Mum a ring, ask her to come round a bit earlier than scheduled and look after Dylan. After all, I've got a Christmas party to prepare for.

THE END

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There's a bit missing." I leaned over the table in Mum's dining room so I could study the little gap in her jigsaw puzzle. The 1,000-piece picture of a garden lay on a square of hardboard so she could move it around.

I normally visited my mum on a Friday afternoon. I'd sit with her over a cuppa and a biscuit (unless she was in a wine mood.) At 66, she still lived in the same council house where she'd bought up me and my brother and sister.

Now, her jigsaw was missing a single red rose.

"Are you sure you had all the pieces when you got it?" I asked.

"Yes, my friend Janet loaned it to me. She's ever so fussy about her pieces. Don't worry about it, Nat. It'll turn up."

"Did you suck it up the vacuum?" I asked anyway.

"No, I didn't bother in here this week. I was busy doing other things."

"It can't be far then, can it? I'll just have a quick look." I moved one of her dining-room chairs clear of the table and peered into the shadows beneath. The trouble with her carpet is it's one of those with a very elaborate pattern. It could have disguised four trees and a gazebo as well as one missing bloom.

"I said leave it, Natalie," Mum repeated as I disappeared under the table.

"I don't mind." I did try to look after her. She'd barely left the house since my dad passed away. I started running my hands across the pile of the carpet. What my eyes refused to see, my fingertips might blunder into. While I was crawling about, the doorbell rang.

"That'll be your sister," said Mum.

"What? On a Friday?"

"I'll let her in, then make us all a cuppa."

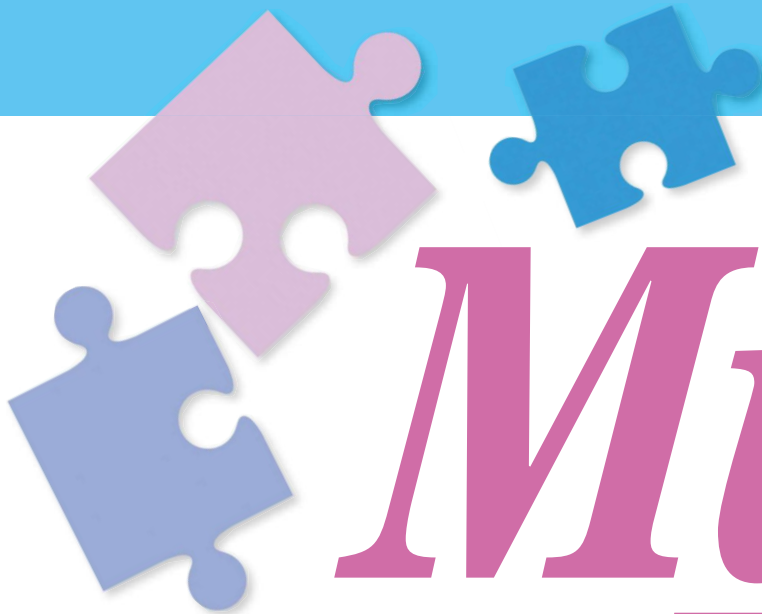
Just as I found a stray cornflake, my sister's voice made me jump. "What are you doing under there?" Julie asked.

"There's a jigsaw piece missing."

"Oh, I bet it's gone up the vacuum."

"No, Mum said she hasn't vacuumed in here this week."

"I bet she's got her days all



The Miss Pie

My sister and brother are both a lot smarter than me — but not always quite as smart as they think...

mixed up. I'll go and look."

Julie's 34, four years older than me. She went to university. I didn't. She lives in this big house with her husband and two kids. The place looks like something a Lottery winner would be proud of.

"No," I heard Mum say to her in the kitchen, "don't bother looking for it. It doesn't matter."

"It won't take five minutes," Julie argued.

Finished with my carpet foraging, I crawled out. I could hear Julie in the hall, lugging Mum's vacuum out of the

or a searchlight.

"Achoo," the sound of Julie's massive sneeze drifted in from the kitchen. She must have emptied the vacuum out by now. "Get me a fork, Mum, and I'll work my way through the mess with it. Have you been sucking up spiders? I hope that's not a leg."

The doorbell's bing-bongs drowned her out.

"That'll be your brother," said Mum.

Julie gave a huge tut. No, she wouldn't be thrilled to have

I always expected him to be doctor-like after that and say, "Stick out your tongue" or "Let me listen to your chest".

After Mum let him in, he stuck his head around the dining-room door. He found me peering under the sideboard. "What are you doing, Natalie?"

"Mum's lost a jigsaw piece."

He moved over to the table. "Oh, it's a rose, is it? Has it gone up the vacuum?"

"I'm looking into that," came Julie's rather smug call from the kitchen.

"I'm searching in here," I tagged on. I didn't want him stomping all over my grid.

David glanced back to Mum in the hall. "Where did it come from, this jigsaw then?"

"Janet. She'll have counted all the pieces. Don't bother worrying about that."

A yelp from the kitchen interrupted. "Is this it?" Julie called.

I made a dash for it. I nearly cannoned off my brother in the narrow hallway. Julie, kneeling on the tiles in front of a pile of grey dust and fluff, held up her fork. The thing stuck between its

"I could hear Julie in the hall, lugging Mum's vacuum out of the cupboard"

cupboard. It rattled as she wheeled it into the kitchen. It's one of those that collect all the muck in a transparent tub. "Find some newspaper for me, Mum," Julie instructed. I knew she wouldn't quit now.

I'll search the dining-room in a grid pattern, I then decided, the way the police would search a field. Following my plan, I walked slowly down the carpet, my head tracking left to right, right to left. I felt like a radar dish

David around. He's a GP. He'd risen to the top of our sibling pile. He'd outstripped even her and her maths degree.

Had mum gathered us all together for one of her meetings, I wondered? She very rarely bothered. She always said we were better handled one by one. She meant Julie and David. Not me. I'm nothing like those two.

"Mum, how are you?" my brother said from the porch.

e. sing ce

prongs looked as furry as a next-door's cat. "Look, it has some red on it. I think I can see a leaf."

I inspected it, but David leaned in far closer than me. "How are your eyes these days, Julie?" he asked.

"Why?"
"Because that's a bit of paper, not a jigsaw piece."

Julie squinted. "Oh, is it?"
David stood looking all superior. "Mum, has your jigsaw been anywhere else? Has it always been in the dining-room?" He'd need a pipe and a violin if he wanted to pretend to be Sherlock Holmes properly.

"I did move it when I was sorting out all the corner bits." Mum crossed her arms. "It'll turn up the next time I clean. Don't bother with it now. I need to talk to you all."

"I'll just have a quick look for you." David emphasised the "for you", as if asking for a gold cup and a medal.

Mum muttered, "You lot should never be in this house all together." She clattered cups and saucers onto a tray as David disappeared into the lounge. Julie carried on shifting through all her dust and fluff, while I headed back to my grid.

Just as I reached the skirting board on a second pass of the room, Mum called, "Natalie, take

the jigsaw off the table for me, please."

I did as she asked. I lofted up the awkward big board the jigsaw sat upon and angled it carefully towards the carpet.

Mum walked in, carrying a tray. "We have important things to discuss," she said as she arranged the teapot and all the cups and saucers around the table.

I peered under the chairs one more time. "Do we?"

"Yes, we do. Julie! David! Your tea's ready," she called.

David wandered in from his

fruitless search of the lounge, looking sheepish. Julie came in from the kitchen, looking dusty and rather annoyed. We all sat down at the table.

Mum's gaze drifted over to my dad's photos on the windowsill. He'd always been the disciplinarian in our family. She was the kisses and the cuddles, while he sorted us all out. He'd never changed as we'd grown up. I don't think we ever wanted him to. It would have been chaos. My brother and sister's sibling rivalry would have got out of control.

After Mum poured out our tea, she settled down in her seat. "I wanted to talk to you all about Christmas."

Over the festive period, we took it in turns to look after her. Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day were all allocated.

We'd worked on a rota system for the last five years.

"It's my turn for Christmas Day," I said. "It'll be a traditional family do. Turkey, roasties and crackers. The Queen's speech and charades in the afternoon."

My brother sat wearing his usual haughty expression. "I've planned a day out for Christmas Eve. We'll go to the coast. It'll be cold, but there's a lovely stately home we can visit. I've checked it's open. Then we'll go for dinner later in a Michelin-starred restaurant."

My lip didn't curl. Honestly, it didn't.

Julie tilted her head and she gave a sly little grin. "On Boxing Day, Mum, we'll go down to London. We'll visit Harrods and all the posh shops. I'll book

“David couldn't hide his disgust. Mum's own expression turned grave.”

a turn on the London Eye. I do hope it snows. It'll look spectacular. We'll have dinner and catch a show, then stay overnight in a hotel."

David couldn't hide his disgust. Mum's own expression turned grave. "Yes, well, it all sounds lovely but that's why I asked you all here today. I've decided to cancel Christmas this year with all of you. I'm going to stay at home instead."

"Mum, you never stay at home!" David turned a little pale. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, Mum!" Julie sounded at least twice as worried as he did, "Are you OK?"

It would have to be something huge, something monumental,

to change her Christmas plans. Something unprecedented. I peered down at the carpet to the jigsaw, frowning as I thought of the most outlandish thing possible. My creativity astonishes even me sometimes, but then again Mum had said about her puzzle, "I did move it when I was sorting out all the corner bits." Where did you move it to, Mum? Where? I gasped as that answer slotted neatly into my head. Had she met another jigsaw fan? I glanced up to the ceiling, since her bedroom sat directly overhead. Did she already suspect who accidentally, or otherwise, had ended up with that missing bloom? "I need to return a very special rose to you, my darling," I imagined some stranger saying. "Here I am, the 'real' missing piece in your life."

I grinned at the scenario I'd created. "Mum," I said, "has someone else been helping with your puzzles lately?"

She blinked at me, likely astounded by my creativity too. Then she smiled like a schoolgirl with a crush and blushed.

Oh blimey, I'm right! "In that case, I can't wait to meet him. Have you asked him if he's got your missing piece at all?"

"No," she said. "I thought I'd wait until he popped round today."

Bing bong — the doorbell rang, right on cue, and she scrambled off to answer it.

My brother's a GP, my sister has a degree, but sometimes they're still a lot slower than little old me. David gawped. Julie gasped. I've never been the competitive sort, honestly, but I did preen like a peacock at having beaten those two to Mum's punchline.

My family did have a missing piece all right. I doubted this one would look much like a rose, but he'd still be very welcome. He might even sort out my brother and sister's sibling rivalry.

I think I've proved in that regard that I'm absolutely fine. Though I never will let David and Julie forget how the 'blooming' obvious slipped by them both the day my mum led in Tom — her very handsome jigsaw man.

THE END

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Mine to Avenge

Alain De Gael's young visitor appeared to have been poisoned but would Sister Ursula be able to find out how — and why?

Becenan's head groom was warming his hands above the blacksmith's fire when he heard a cry from the gatehouse, warning those within that the master's guests had arrived. He replaced his mittens and strode across the frost-tipped ground to greet the horses tramping into the bailey.

There were three of them, carrying richly-garbed nobles wrapped against December's chill. It was one of these that caused the groom to frown as he helped her alight. A young woman with witch's raven hair and eyes that held sinful promise only meant one thing...

Sister Ursula smiled to herself as she skirted the cloisters to her infirmary. Advent was a lovely time of year, brightening the short days of December with warm anticipation of Christ's birth celebrations to come. It was also a time to fast and contemplate, before the merriment and abundance of Christmastide. As infirmarian of the little convent in the woods, Ursula was kept busy

tending those ailments that were a staple of winter. She took a tour of her little kingdom now, pausing at each occupied cot to exchange a word with the nun at rest there, before ensconcing herself in her stillroom. It was nice to potter amongst her medicaments in a bit of peace.

Even as the thought crossed her mind, there came the sound of hurrying feet, then Magnuss the Dane, the tall, golden constable from the nearby manor of Becenan, appeared.

"Sister, you are needed."

"What is it?" Ursula asked anxiously.

"Tis my Lord Alain's young guest," said Magnuss. "She's been taken badly ill."

It was normally a pleasure whenever Ursula had occasion to visit the fortified manor of the De Gaels. Nestling in a rolling valley of rich fields ringed by the woodland in which the little convent dwelt, Becenan was a prosperous, well-managed land with a strong community. It was also the main home of Alain De Gael and his sister, Ursula's long-standing friend, the adroit and

elegant Lady Constantina.

Today, though, there was no warm smile to greet her when Magnuss ushered Ursula into Lord and Lady's presence. Instead, Constantina's face was strained as she escorted the little nun up a steep flight of steps to the guest chamber.

"Alain's guest, one Rohese Courcelle, took ill all of a sudden," she explained. "She is complaining of burning mouth

“
She is complaining of a burning mouth and cramping stomach pains”

and cramping stomach pains.”

Ursula's own stomach sank at sight of a writhing figure on the bed and she shrugged off her cloak. Constantina remained only long enough to say, "I will inform the lady's relatives of your arrival. Please do what you can for her, Ursula."

Frowning at my lady's tone, Ursula turned her full attention to her patient. "Has she

vomited?" she asked Magnuss. When he answered in the negative, she began rummaging in her medicaments basket. "Then we must purge her of whatever she has ingested."

Together, constable and nun relieved the woman's stomach of its contents with a cordial of Lady's Nightcap sprinkled with bryony. She was then given poppy syrup to ease her throat and help her sleep. When the patient was quiet, Ursula sighed and wiped a hand across her brow. "That is all that can be done for now. Please, tell me what happened here."

The Dane had set a stool before the fire for the little nun. Now, he seated himself opposite, his manner grave.

"My lady's party arrived yesterday, supposedly to rest a few days before they journey on to King Henry's court for the Christmas celebrations. But really, it is to pass my Lord Alain and his largest land under inspection."

Ursula's brows rose. "He considers marriage, then?"

Magnuss nodded. "Yonder lady is much sought-after, so gossip says, and no wonder. A handsome creature not long widowed, with a nice manor to offer as her dowry administered by her first husband's father, now her guardian, who travels with her."



"And she seemed in good health when she arrived?"

"Aye, Soester; in excellent spirits, in fact. There was food and dancing yesternight, of which she partook in plenty."

"As did everyone else present," Ursula surmised.

"Aye, and no other has sickened."

"So this happened overnight?"

"This morning," Magnuss corrected, "not long after she'd broken her fast, says her maid."

Casting a quick eye over her sleeping patient, Ursula rose and checked the contents of the basin they'd just used. When she straightened, frowning, Magnuss asked quietly, "What are you looking for, Soester?"

Ursula's usually merry face was grim. "Signs of poison."

Raised voices greeted Ursula's return to the solar.

"...foul play at work, De Gael, mark my words! I warn you, if she dies..."

"She will not expire, lord, not if my humble skills have any say."

The voice that had soothed many a visitor to Langlois' infirmary now worked its magic on the red-faced man haranguing Lord Alain. As he gaped at the placid little nun, Constantina left her brother's side to approach her.

"This is Sister Ursula, a skilled healer from the nearby convent. Sir Nigel and Lady Blanche Courcelle are your patient's guardians, Sister."

Suppressing her natural instinct to inspect this richly-robed rooster and his pallid hen, Ursula performed the neatest curtsy arthritic knees would allow. "She appears to have ingested something poisonous," she reported, "though I cannot be certain at this stage as to its name. There are not many toxins readily available at this season."

"Poison?" The Lady Blanche gasped.

"Do not be alarmed," Ursula reassured her. "We have purged her of whatever she consumed and the worst seems to have passed. I believe it to have been a fairly weak dose."

Nigel Courcelle turned on his hosts. "How on earth could such a thing have happened?"

Alain had turned ashen.

Mine to Avenge

"I assure you, Nigel, 'tis the last thing I would have wanted! I will have the matter investigated immediately."

"There is no need for that, for surely we all know who is responsible." Courcelle's blazing eyes flicked to Constantina. "You were jealous of Rohese, were you not, lady? And was it not you who had the care of her last night and again this morning?"

Ursula drew in a shocked breath. The hand that Constantina had placed on Ursula's shoulder stiffened for an instant, the only sign she gave of having felt the sting of Courcelle's lash.

"Sir!" Alain exclaimed, hand dropping to the sword at his belt. "I understand you are upset, but you will not malign my sister in so unchivalrous and unjustified a manner!"

"Forgive him, please, my lord!" Lady Blanche wailed, stepping between the two men. "He is distracted with worry and knows not what he says."

"Lady Blanche is right." Constantina cast a cautionary look at her brother, eyes conveying a message of calm before turning to Courcelle. "As my brother's chatelaine, it is my duty and pleasure to care for the guests of this hall, and so I did to both the ladies of Courcelle. But we will, of course, look into how this happened, not least to ensure that nobody else is at risk."

Courcelle fixed his gaze on Ursula, cheeks still aflame. "You say my ward will recover, Sister?"

"She is not out of the woods yet," Ursula replied. "But by God's grace and close care for

the next few hours, I believe all will be well."

"Then I entrust her to your charge."

Ursula glanced at Constantina then bowed her head. "As you wish, my lord."

"What rot is this cockerel knight crowing?" Ursula demanded of her friend the moment they were alone. "And why are you not striking back at him in the manner you usually employ with such men?"

Constantina did not check her stride. "There is little point. Lord Nigel believes his ward to be perfection itself, and every woman Rohese interacts with jealous of her. I, of course, must be doubly so, as I stand to lose my position as Becenan's lady if Rohese were to wed Alain."

There was such inertia in her tone that Ursula felt compelled to take her arm. "What is it, my lady?"

Constantina sighed. "I am tired, Ursula. Tired of living my life for others, of having such responsibilities. Perhaps the time has come for me to retire to that nunnery I once thought of."

"But you love Becenan," Ursula protested, "as it adores you!"

"All good things must eventually come to an end, as you well know. Go, now, and see what you can learn of this sorry situation." When Ursula raised her brows, Constantina couldn't help but smile. "I know you, old friend. Your mind is already spinning round the whys and wherefores of Rohese's condition. But take care you do not forget your promise to

Courcelle in your investigations,

or else you too will bear the brunt of his lash!"

"Then tell me quickly what you think happened."

"I honestly do not know. Last night, Rohese was the fragrant flower to a hall of bees, as full of smiles and vitality as I have seen any lady. When I escorted her to her chamber, she seemed secretive but satisfied. This morn, she was definitely sluggish, though I confess I took scant notice. I... had little liking for the lady, or her kind; those that value possessions above people. And judging by Lord Nigel's reaction, it would appear I did not hide my true feelings as

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Have you any
proof of what
caused this
sudden illness?”

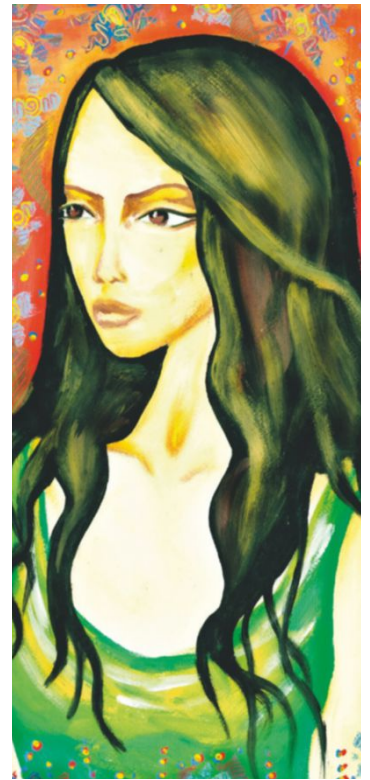
well as I supposed."

Ursula frowned. "Who exactly is this woman?"

"The widow of Aubrey Courcelle, a former friend of Alain's whose kind heart turned out to be a weak one. She is ambitious and keen to remarry, if the right landed lord can be persuaded to offer for her."

"But you do not believe that lord to be your brother?"

"You know Alain. His compassion and constancy



would not mix well with a mercenary disposition such as this woman seems to possess. Despite that, I would never have wished her laid low like this. Your knowledge of all things herbal is legendary, Ursula. Have you any proof of what caused this sudden illness?"

"Not as yet," said Ursula. "But I promise that before I am through, I will find some."

Ursula had detected poison's presence here before, at the death of Becenan's former lord. Then, there had been reason to suspect the De Gaels — Rollo 'Forkbeard' was the wicked counterpoint to brother Alain's kind disposition, the scourge of everyone's life. This time, no such motive existed, no matter what Courcelle may claim. But someone had tried to harm his ward; that much was true.

Her patient was not alone when Ursula returned to the guest chamber; an elderly servant sat by Rohese's bedside.

"Good morrow," she greeted the woman kindly. "You must be the lady Rohese's maid."

"And nurse this many a year," the emaciated maid told her pointedly.

Ursula smiled. "Then together, we can bring my lady back to health. I am Sister Ursula, infirmarian of Langlois convent."

The maid unstiffened somewhat, and replied airily, "I am Isemay."

"Well, Isemay," said Ursula as, removing the hands she'd habitually tucked into her wide-belled sleeves, she began to check her patient. "Can you tell me what my lady ate and drank this morning?"

"Just the wine brought in by a servant, and the spiced honey cake she is partial to."

Frowning, Ursula began to pace around the chamber, scanning her surroundings. When her toe unearthed something in the rushes strewn about the floor, she gave a start and bent to retrieve it. A fragment of fresh evergreen plant gleamed between her fingertips. Now things were beginning to make sense.

"You know my lady well," she said to Isemay. "Does she have any enemies?"

Isemay snorted. "Many, Sister! She is a striking woman with a charm that can bewitch nearly any man. That breeds envy in the breast, evil in the soul."

"A case of vengeance, then, perhaps. A stalking shadow..." When the maid's features furrowed, she added, "Do not fret, my dear. The lady will soon be back to full strength."

"And much good may it do her!" Isemay hissed.

The sudden venom in her manner startled Ursula. But before she could enquire into its cause, the Courcelles had entered the chamber.

Both servants rose as lord and lady approached the bed, Nigel Courcelle's fowl-like features narrowing as he studied his ward. "She looks better," he announced. "Have you discovered the cause?"

"This, I believe." Ursula opened her palm to reveal the leaf. "It's the Christmas Herb, or Hellebore. Well-known for its medicinal but also toxic uses."

Blanche whimpered and began to wring her hands. Courcelle shot one fulminating look at his ward.

"Can she be safely left?" He snapped. When Ursula nodded, he gestured for her to precede him. "Then come, and tell De Gael what you just told me."

Alain was evidently disturbed by Ursula's suspicions. He began to pace the solar, the limp he'd earned in his youth after an awkward fall from a horse becoming more pronounced with each step. Constantina watched him worriedly.

"You are certain this is what Rohese ingested?" she asked.

Ursula nodded. "It grows here in your garden, my lady, as it does at Langlois. It can be efficacious for certain deliriums and stomach issues, but only in the right doses." She paused then added significantly, "It is also traditionally strewn around homes to ward off witches. The Lady Rohese is often spoken of as bewitching, is she not? It could be that someone sought to invoke the Hellebore's supposed power against her, and it accidentally found its way into something she consumed."

"Unlikely," Courcelle said.

"Perhaps. But as it is also unlikely that a member of this honourable family, favoured by our king, would resort to such treatment against an old friend's widow, we must look elsewhere for the truth."

It was at this moment that a lovely young woman burst into the solar, her dove-grey eyes spitting steel. "I have just heard the whispers," she cried, "and I cannot believe such an outrageous slander was ever spoken out loud!" She rounded on Courcelle. "The Lady Constantina is all that is fair and kind, and adored by those under her care. To accuse her of such an act in her own home whilst enjoying her hospitality is beyond pardon!"

Ursula gaped at her. Lady Isobel De Gael was sweet enough, but much like the delicate butterfly she resembled; after years of rough treatment at the hands of her late husband and former lord of Becenan, the devil Rollo 'Forkbeard', she normally only showed any spirit when it came to the protection and welfare of her little daughter.

It was Constantina who broke the silence. "Peace, Isobel," she said softly, moving to wrap an arm around her sister-in-law.

"Forgive me, my lady," Courcelle stuttered, visibly

affected by this fey-like creature's distress. "I spoke in haste, and meant no harm."

"Why not show Lord Courcelle the gardens and what you plan for them next spring?" Constantina suggested in the ensuing awkwardness. "I am sure we could all do with some air."

After a moment, Isobel nodded and tentatively accepted Courcelle's proffered arm. Constantina hung back as the others left the solar.

"Well, who would have guessed Isobel had claws for anyone other than her own chick?" Ursula mused. "She obviously cares for you."

**“
The shadow of
suspicion that has
fallen over
Becenan will
remain**”

Constantina sighed. "As I have grown to care for her, and little Adney. But though I appreciate her defence, it does not stop tongues from wagging. I fear we will not be able to prove the truth of this sorry situation, and if we do not, the shadow of suspicion that has fallen over Becenan will remain and may damage Alain's reputation."

Ursula made her way to Becenan's little chapel, needing the composure of her daily devotions to calm her mind. My lady was right; if they failed to uncover the real hand behind the attack on Rohese Courcelle, that whispered taint, however posterous, would stain. Henry, the new king, though fair, was also possessed of the infamous Angevin temper. The kingdom may now be at peace, but it was still too soon after the hard years of civil strife to risk being out of favour with England's powerful and volatile sovereign.

She was still on her knees

when Magnuss arrived.

"I checked the wine jug remains," he reported as he helped her to her feet. "If there was poison present, it was very slight."

"It may have been powdered or, more likely, put into her cake," Ursula surmised. "I found traces of Hellebore in her chamber. The sweetness of the cake would disguise the herb's bitter tang."

Magnuss smiled wryly. "You are having an interesting day, eh, Soester?"

Ursula rolled her eyes. "Indeed, though I have yet to lift this cloud of suspicion covering Becenan."

"Placed there by Lord Courcelle himself, correct?" When Ursula nodded, Magnuss tapped a finger against his bearded chin. "He is quick to blame others, that man. Yet I have heard he was most reluctant to come here."

"Why?" Ursula wondered.

"Lord Alain is well-favoured in many a hall and Lady Rohese is seeking to better her position. But that does not sit well with Lord Nigel. 'Tis rumoured that her dower lands bring in a tidy sum. Reason enough, I'd say, to want to stop their transferral to another purse quite so soon."

"And yet he seemed genuinely distressed by my lady's condition."

The Dane's lips twitched. "We are not all as honest as you, little Soester. Most of us hide our true feelings behind masks."

"Could it be possible for a stranger to get access to the kitchens or hall?"

Magnuss was emphatic. "Not even when we are celebrating. Every inch of these walls is always watched. Why, what are you thinking?"

Ursula sighed. "Of another dead end, apparently."

The guest chamber felt stuffy when Ursula returned, Isemay drooping on her stool at her mistress' bedside. Ursula turned back the shutters to let in a little of the air, remaining to gaze across Becenan's walls to the forest where within the peaceful confines of the convent, poisonous intent was the furthest thing from any mind.

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Mine to Avenge

When she heard her patient stirring, she replaced the shutters and crossed to greet the Lady Rohese. Wide eyes blinked up at her, a handsome face framed by glossy locks of raven-black, and as she introduced herself, Ursula could understand why folk spoke about this woman's spell.

"A convent?" Rohese's fingers clawed at Ursula's arm. "Then take me out of here, Sister, I beg you. I am not safe!"

"No dramatics, now, mistress," Isemay scolded.

Instantly, the fingers lifted from Ursula's sleeve to slap her maid's face. "Mind your manners!"

"Easy, lady," Ursula said. "You are not well. Take some broth."

Sighing, Rohese consented. Ursula patted her hand then followed Isemay. "Does she always treat you like that?"

Isemay's nod was terse. Ursula frowned. "And yet you love her."

"Love her and hate her," Isemay admitted. "But I am tied to her, for better or worse. It is too late now for me to be anything other than her slave."

Another victim of Rohese's strange allure, Isemay was also an object for pity, caught as she was in a twisted, unwanted devotion. But was she also the agent of evil? It would have been easy for her to lace the lady's food with a taste of her own suppressed bitterness. Could she have taken her revenge and sought to lay the blame at the feet of her hosts?

Still thinking furiously, Ursula made her way to the slumbering gardens. The De Gaels and Lord Nigel were not there, but Lady Blanche was, standing by the south wall and worrying at her hands. Ursula hurried over.

"My lady, you are unwell."

Lady Blanche seemed not to hear. "Come," she

coaxed. "Let me help you."

"I need to pray, I think," Blanche muttered.

"I know just the place."

The wooded convent was like a welcome blanket, wrapping those within its walls in warmth. Ursula sighed and took a moment to breathe of its air. After consultation with Courcelle and the De Gaels, the Lady Rohese was recovering in the infirmary and, after reporting on events to the Reverend Mother Osyth, Ursula was now on her way to fulfil a promise to a friend.

Her feet made little sound on the flagstones but still, Lady Blanche looked up from her prayers as Ursula approached and joined her before the altar.

"This is a lovely place," Blanche murmured, "though it soothes and condemns at the same time."

Sighing, Ursula gently turned the lady's hand to reveal the irritated skin there. "Our Reverend Mother once told me life is no one colour, but myriad shades. The river can be grey-blue and also shades of green, then when the sunlight hits the surface, it becomes a precious sparkling silver. Human beings are the same; a multitude of shades and emotions. I know how you earned this rash, lady, but not quite why."

Blanche stared at the candles on the altar, a sheen of tears filming her eyes. "Aubrey was my only son to survive infancy and he was perfect; the epitome of what a knight of the realm should be, yet he preferred peace and comfort to combat. And that woman killed him with her wicked schemes and infidelities. She drove him to his death a broken man, all his dreams destroyed. When I watched his body lowered into the ground, I vowed his death



would not be in vain. Then when it seemed as though she'd do it all again with that nice Lord Alain, I couldn't bear it." Her fingers clenched. "I couldn't let it happen again, couldn't stand by and watch another decent man drown in her honey trap. So when I saw the Hellebore here, I took some and crushed it into some of the sweet cake she's so partial to, scattering some more amongst the rushes as an extra precaution. I only meant to incapacitate her long enough for us to move on without Lord Alain proposing."

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay..." quoted Ursula softly.

Blanche swallowed, rubbing at the rash along her hand. "Will I go to hell, Sister?"

Ursula got stiffly to her feet to pluck a candle from its stand. "We are taught that God is forgiving. And in this, the season of light in darkness, of hope for all humankind, He would surely be more so. Your ward will recover. Take comfort in that."

They both turned as Courcelle burst into the church. Blanche drew in her breath at the knowing expression on his face. Pressing the candle gently into her hands, Ursula left her, pausing beside Lord Nigel.

"You will make my apologies at Becenan," he muttered.

The little nun inclined her

head. "Do not fret. The Lady Constantina is very forbearing. She is also very discreet. She will ensure that Rohese's illness will have come about as a result of too much honey."

He nodded, then offered her a stiff bow before striding away.

From the roof of the gatehouse tower, there was an uninterrupted view of the slumbering valley. Constantina turned from it to smile at Ursula. "So this sorry episode comes to a close. Not quite all's well that ends well, though."

"Oh, I don't know. The Courcelles have faced up to their past, Lady Rohese has had a lesson in humility and Isobel has proven her respect for you."

Constantina sighed. "Poor Alain. He was quite taken with Rohese. Now he wonders if he will ever find a suitable bride."

"And you are worried you will not be able to leave him."

My lady nodded. "Isobel, as well. One day, perhaps, she will be able to trust a man enough to remarry. But until then, it seems she is relying on me to be her companion."

"Tis the burden of being too good at your role, I'm afraid. But have faith. If you really wish for the tranquillity of the cloister, your time will come."

"You have forgotten yourself in all of this, my dear friend. You saved Rohese's life, and Becenan's reputation. Thank you seems so inadequate."

"But it will do very well."

As the two unlikely friends looked out again across the valley, a chill wind arose. "It looks like winter's bite will be with us by Christmas," said Constantina.

"As it should be. 'Tis the season for warming yourself by a roaring fire as we look forward to something wonderful."

"And we shall celebrate at Becenan this year," vowed my lady, "with all the sweet and frothy delights of the season."

The little nun's sigh was full of anticipation. "Indeed. So, my friend, rejoice! And may the new year bring you health and happiness. Now, what was that you were saying about frothy delights..?"

THE END

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Years ago, I'd made a decision to pretend December didn't exist. I put the whole festive season in a box in my mind, marked *Do Not Open*. But this year, I couldn't avoid it...

Poppy is leaning forward to put a gold bauble on the Christmas tree.

She glances up at me to check – is it in the right place? That's Poppy, so full of questions, always looking for approval — to me even more than her dad, these days. How did she do it, this little girl, how did she get into my heart?

"Is this OK, Laura?" she smiles at me. "Or do I need a red one?"

"I think gold is just fine. How about we put another red one here?" We both dive towards the box and it tips over. Tinsel and baubles roll everywhere.

The smell of mince pies wafts from the kitchen. Mark's an expert mince-pie maker. I've left him to it. I've left him to pretty much everything when it comes to Christmas. I wasn't sure if I could do this — I'm still not sure. I swallow hard. Most of the time it's OK, but every so often I get a flash of the past.

I've managed to avoid Christmas for the last decade and a half. It's not as difficult as people think. Being out of the country works well. Once, I hired a remote cottage with no internet signal. Yet another time I stayed home, but I told everyone I'd gone away. I would have done that this year too — if I hadn't met Mark.

And his daughter, Poppy,

of course. She's still gathering up baubles. I can't believe I've only known them a few months. It feels much longer.

Mark appears at the door. He's wearing a silly apron with a giant cartoon Rudolph head on it, and carrying a plate of mince pies.

"How are my two favourite girls? It's looking very festive in here." He eyes the floor, which is covered in paper

chains and strings of silver beads. "Are you having fun?"

Poppy gives him the hugest grin, revealing the gap between her front teeth. "Only two more days 'til Santa comes!" She spins around, narrowly missing an angel. "This is going to be the best Christmas ever."

How can I argue with that?

Poppy's too young to remember her mum. She died when she was just 18 months old. It's different for me. My parents died when I was 10. It was Christmas Eve. There was a fire. It was started by an electrical fault, probably the Christmas tree lights, the chief fire officer said later. The tree was on the upstairs landing. Both my parents were overcome by smoke. I only escaped because I was downstairs on the settee. I'd had earache

and Mum had let me curl up there with a hot-water bottle. I'd fallen asleep, so they'd decided not to move me.

For a long time afterwards, I wished they had. In that one awful night, I lost the two people I loved the most. I felt guilty and grief-stricken in equal measure. Christmas was never going to be good after that, was it? Although my grandparents

did try. "They wouldn't have wanted you to be sad, Laura," Gran used to say every year as Christmas approached. "They'd have wanted you to enjoy Christmas for them."

"Yeah," I'd say, trying not to remember the magical festive times we'd always had. I'm sure they couldn't have been as totally perfect as I remembered, but it certainly seemed like it back then. Gran and Granddad did their best, but nothing could ever match up.

After I left home, I stopped trying. I made an executive decision to pretend December didn't exist, put the whole festive season in a box in my mind, marked *Do Not Open*. Although I did always call round with presents for Gran and Granddad, of course – the earlier the better, so they couldn't rope me into anything nearer the day

itself. But as soon as we'd exchanged them, I fled. I think they preferred it like that too. They were never big on Christmas. When they retired, they moved to a villa in Spain, which made things easier. I've been there lots of times, but never in December.

There's no running away from this one, though. This year, I've got to face Christmas head on.

I feel Mark's touch on my shoulder and I realise suddenly that he's speaking. "Hey, penny for your thoughts," he says.

I blink. "I was just wondering what's on television tonight," I improvise hastily.

"It's *Shrek*," Poppy says, her voice high with excitement. "Do you like *Shrek*, Laura?"

"Love it," I say.

Mark looks relieved.

Much later, the three of us are all curled up on the settee in front of *Shrek* and I'm beginning to relax, when a piercing whistle rents the air. Poppy, sitting next to me, jumps out of her skin.

Mark is on his feet immediately. "Smoke detector," he mutters.

He doesn't need to explain. I've had smoke detectors in every house I've ever lived in. They get checked religiously every six months. I am smoke detector-mad.

"It's all right, darling," I say to Poppy, because I can feel her trembling beside me.

"I expect Daddy left something in the oven," she says, her blue eyes exasperated, and it's in that moment that I realise it isn't Poppy who is shaking. It's me.

"I bite my lip in a desperate attempt to force myself back into the present"

Christmas I never was

The smell of burning merging with the silver of tinsel and the flicker of the tree lights, red, orange and gold. They intertwine in my head, and I'm straight back there. Back to the Christmas that never was.

My hands are sweaty, my heart is pounding. I bite my lip hard, in a desperate attempt to force myself into the present. They're called emotional flashbacks, apparently, a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. There's no logic to them. No rationality. Just that age-old part of our brain reacting to a fear that was once very real. Re-dredging it. Thanks a lot, brain. Like I needed to go through this again!

I manage to hold it together enough so that Poppy doesn't notice anything. But Mark does. He comes back into the room, still waving a tea-towel.

"Sorry, guys, I think the sausage rolls may be a bit overdone." He glances at me, his eyes aware. But he doesn't say anything until much later that night, when we're in bed, spooned together in the soft glow of the bedside lights.

"You were pretty freaked out earlier." He rubs my shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?"

When we met, back at the beginning of the summer, I told him I'd lost my parents, but I didn't go into detail. Then, as our relationship progressed from friendship into love, from the hot summer through to the reds and golds of autumn, I told him I wasn't a fan of Christmas. But I've never told him why.

Mark is the kind of person

who doesn't pry. He's very laid-back. Very relaxing to be around. And I've always known that he's had his share of heartache, too. Sometimes heartbreak is best left in the past, isn't it? It was a tacit agreement between us.

But now, suddenly, I want to tell him. I want to get it out there. It feels as though this is the right time.

He doesn't interrupt as I outline what happened, just strokes my arm in that gentle way he has, as we sit up in bed.

"Every year," I say, "as soon as the Christmas adverts start, I run

my cheeks. Where did those sneaky beggars come from?

"Why don't we go downstairs?" Mark says, "and I'll make us a cuppa."

We sit in the glow of the tree lights to drink it, with a box of tissues and a plate of mini chocolate logs on the coffee table in front of us.

"There's that song, isn't there?" Mark says. "*They sold me a dream of Christmas.*" His face is gentle. "I used to believe it, too. Then I lost Cathy."

"How did you get over it?"
"There wasn't really much

“Now, suddenly, I want to tell him, to get it out there”

away." I hesitate. It's hard to explain this kind of stuff. But I need to try. "All those happy families, sitting around for their Christmas dinners with their crackers and their silly hats, all smiling and laughing." I pause. "I know it's not real. I know it's just so manufacturers can sell their mince pies or their turkeys or whatever, but it used to hurt so much, Mark. I used to feel like I was the only person in the world who didn't have a family."

Mark doesn't say anything. He just nods, his eyes very dark. "So I decided it would be best if I just pretended to myself that Christmas didn't exist."

"Only this year, you couldn't."

"No." I can feel tears wet on

choice. Poppy was so young. I had to be there for her. For a long time, I just pretended I was OK. Until, eventually, I was."

"Acting," I say. "Like the happy families on the TV adverts."

"Precisely." He pauses. "It doesn't just apply to Christmas, does it, Laura? In January, they'll be selling us dreams of slim people, fitting into their jeans. We can be like them too, if we'll just buy the amazing new diet book or the amazing new exercise program."

"And holidays," I murmur, catching on. "The television will

be full of exotic locations, and families smiling in the sun. We all know reality isn't like that."

"Don't we just?" He smiles at me and I think, as I've thought many times since we met, how very wise he is, my lovely man.

"We're real, though," he adds. "Poppy and me. We'll still be sitting here, eating turkey curry long after the last pine needle has fallen off the tree. And I want you to be with us, Laura. I love you so much."

The expression in his eyes is tender. And I think, "Oh yes, that's real. That's very real."

There's a noise from upstairs and we both look up to see that Poppy has come out of her bedroom and is standing at the top of the stairs in her nightie. "I can't sleep, Daddy. Can Laura read me a bedtime story?"

"Yes, sweetie." I can feel my voice croak up a bit.

"We'll both come," Mark says, squeezing my hand.

Upstairs, Poppy races across the room and leaps onto her bed, all in one fluid movement. She looks expectantly at me as I reach for a book from the shelf. It's the one about the dog who rescues his family from the river. I've read it to her a dozen times. It's the one she always wants. "Continuity," I think. "That's what we all want, isn't it?"

There are no guarantees of that either. Perfect Christmases and happily-ever-afters. We all know they don't exist, don't we? But I feel more hopeful.

"Don't worry, Laura." Poppy's blue eyes are wide and serious. "I don't think Daddy will burn the dinner. He can cook very well sometimes."

I smile, touched that she is trying to reassure me. Shouldn't it be the other way round?

"I'm really excited about Christmas," she says. "Are you looking forward to it?"

"Yes," I say. And for the

first time in more than a decade, I really am.

THE END

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The Reading Group by Della Galton (writing as Della Parker) is out on 2 November. Published by Quercus, £7.99



Jane Cross Dies

Reading about her own death — twice — in online articles was making Jane feel very uncomfortable. Surely it couldn't happen a third time...

Jane Cross, aged 57, widow and retired schoolteacher, dies after falling from a ladder.

Jane had been cleaning out the guttering. A detective was assigned briefly to the incident because Jane's son highlighted his mother's will, which heavily favoured his sister. Accusations were made, but the investigation revealed nothing untoward. The ladder had slipped, throwing Jane to the ground where she sustained a fatal head injury. It was, said the coroner, a tragic accident.

In the Hapgood-Mullion Scientific Library, a librarian read the online report of this accident and shuddered. Then she read a second article.

Jane Cross, aged 23, laboratory assistant, dies in a hit-and-run.

An unmarked white van killed Jane as she walked home. An eyewitness said the van mounted the pavement and hit her from behind. The eyewitness also supplied a registration, but the registration belonged to a red Honda Civic, not a white van, and was driven by a priest with a solid alibi. The registration was therefore deemed to be attached to the van illegally — meaning the van was now untraceable. Jane was described as a bright, fun-loving young woman with no enemies. The investigation remained ongoing. And this second online article

made the poor librarian in the Hapgood-Mullion Library feel really peculiar.

"It's like reading about my own death." She had her mobile on her desk on speaker. "Twice." She was chatting with her friend Amy, who'd sent her links to the relevant pages.

"It's like *The Terminator*," Amy said. "Where Arnie uses the phone book to track down all

“Jane wasn't quite the world's worst worrier, but she was in the top ten”

the Sarah Connors so he can bump them off."

But Jane Cross, aged 35, lover of books rather than movies, was thinking more of a famous mystery novel. In it, the killer tries to hide his motive by working his way through random people first, to make it look like his intended target was merely the third in a series. Or was it the fourth?

"How did you find all this?" "And more to the point," Jane

thought to herself, 'why did you tell me about it?' Jane wasn't quite the world's worst worrier, but she was in the top ten.

"The second story came up on my news-feed after a renewed appeal for information." Amy was a journalist in Warwick.

"I missed the original story because I was on holiday when it happened. And, I don't know, it got me thinking. So I searched for more news reports — about you and about myself. Didn't really find anything about my namesakes, but your name cropped up again with the ladder story. I thought you'd find it funny."

"Funny?" Amy had always had a warped sense of humour.

"Interesting, then."

"Oh yes, people with my name are getting killed in a variety of interesting ways. And don't they say things come in threes? Which means..."

"...which means you should be careful. Anyway, gotta go. Let's meet up at the end of the month." Amy laughed. "If you're still alive by then."

Jane Cross sat back. She wasn't going to sleep well that night.

"Hey, what's up?" Erica Millwood, library administrator, stepped into the doorway of Jane's office. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Do I?" Jane rolled her shoulders. "Oh, it's nothing. Just an odd phone call from a friend."

"Anything serious?"

"No, I don't think so." She smiled. "At least, I hope not." Then unease tickled her neck. "We are all right, aren't we? You and me? About Charlie, I mean."

Erica shrugged. "Charlie and I are history. We just weren't compatible. But he's a great guy. You could do a lot worse."

Jane had recently started dating Charlie. But until Christmas, Erica and Charlie had been an item. They'd even got engaged, but suddenly it was all off. Then, a couple of months ago, Jane bumped into Charlie in town. They got talking and... well, there was a spark. Both Jane and Charlie were wary of pursuing it because of Erica.

Now, sitting here looking at Erica, Jane began to wonder. Was Erica still in love with him? Was she thinking that Jane was in the way? Had she hatched a nefarious multiple-murder plot to safely bump her off so she might have a second chance?

No, of course not. Obviously, that was ridiculous.

"Anyway, just popped in," Erica said, "to tell you Alan wants a word. He's in Astronomy. Something to do with the journals. And he's not happy."

"Thanks." She went off in search of Alan Franklin, Library Director, glad of the distraction.

'OK,' she told herself as she walked through the labyrinthine library, 'Alan can't know you're on to him.' She'd been careful. More than careful. And besides, Alan wouldn't be bumping off other Jane Crosses so that when he finally killed her, the finger of blame wouldn't point in his direction. That was even more ridiculous than imagining Erica would do it to get Charlie back. Because Alan Franklin was one of the nicest, friendliest...

"What the hell is going on here?" Franklin looked ready to explode when she arrived in Astronomy, his face crimson. "This place is a disaster zone."

She frowned. "It is?" The shelves and racks looked in perfect order. There was no litter, no mess, not a single volume misaligned.

Franklin snatched a binder of journals off a shelf. "94, next to 82? Which is next to 02! None of which should even be on this



shelf in the first place.”

Jane looked more closely. What seemed to be perfect order was, in fact, chaos. Nothing appeared to be in its rightful place. Every volume had been moved. And immediately she knew why. “We had those students in yesterday. From the college.” They hadn’t come for research, but more for a sight-seeing tour organised by their tutor to show them the wonders of a professional scientific library. “They may have been left unattended for 10 minutes or so.” And had decided, apparently, to play a practical joke on the library.

“Sort it out, Jane.” Franklin was fast approaching incandescence. “And quickly.” “Of course. Right away.”

“I can’t believe it!” Franklin stormed out, muttering as he went. “What else can go wrong today?” Then he was gone.

Jane sighed. She would get Kevin on to it. Kevin Ashmore enjoyed filing and rearranging shelves. He was that sort of guy. She set off to fetch him, wondering as she went why Alan Franklin was so tetchy.

Franklin had been running the Hapgood-Mullion Scientific Library since the previous director retired three years earlier, having been appointed by the trustees from outside. And he’d seemed a good fit. Until now.

The library held new, old and antiquarian scientific books. Most scientific journals, too. They had notebooks, letters, personal papers and archives from eminent scientists, dating back centuries. Some of which, Jane was convinced, had gone walkabout. She had copies of loan forms that didn’t quite ring true, and a couple of entries in the database that didn’t match. Nothing concrete, but she had traced the meagre trail of evidence to Alan Franklin, their new director. Maybe his bad mood was down to some dodgy deal gone wrong. After all, some of their items were worth a fortune to the right collector. And the man did have complete access to the library.

She knew she would eventually have to go to the trustees, or possibly the police.

But what if she were wrong? She wouldn’t be able to continue working there following an accusation like that. And she did love her job immensely. So she was biding her time, waiting to see if she could pin down an actual case of theft or fraud, rather than having to rely on what were the hunches of a natural-born worrier.

Still, she would have to be careful. Natural-born worrier, maybe, but Jane Cross had died twice already and this Jane didn’t want to be the third, if it did indeed turn out to be a murder plot by Franklin to cover his tracks. Although this was, obviously, preposterous.

“Ah, Kevin, there you are.” She came across Kevin Ashmore

“
*Jane Cross sat
in her office,
thinking about
Erica’s stumble*”

upstairs in Special Collections. “I need your particular skills.”

“Oh yes?” Kevin adjusted his thick-framed glasses. “How so?”

“Small organisational problem in Astronomy.” She explained about the students and Franklin’s discovery. “So if you could pop down there...”

“Of course!” He smiled eagerly.

Jane mooched around Special Collections after he’d gone. It was virtually impossible to tell, though, whether a particular letter or notebook was missing amongst the thousands of stored items — not without checking every box and file against the database.

Emerging, she came across Erica Millwood and they arrived at the staircase together.

Erica started to say, “Hi, I was just wondering if you’d...” But then she tripped, apparently over nothing that Jane could see, and stumbled. Toppled forwards, hands out. She rammed into Jane, who was

Jane Cross Dies

just placing her foot on the top step. The force was enough to knock Jane off balance and her knee buckled. For an instant, she floated in mid-air over the staircase, then she managed to catch hold of the banister.

"Oh crikey!" Erica reached to grab her, somewhat too late.

"You were almost gone then!" Jane remained welded to the banister and stared at Erica.

"You could have killed me!"

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Erica. Just fine."

"Oh sorry, I'm soooo clumsy." Erica looked as bad as Jane felt. "Come on, I'll make us both a coffee. Steady our nerves. And in the meantime, you can explain this odd loan form I've found —"

Much later, Jane Cross sat in her office, thinking about Erica's mysterious stumble. Was it quite so accidental as Erica's repeated apologies made out? Had Jane not managed to grab the banister, she could easily have tumbled all the way down the high, steep, wooden staircase.

She almost see the online report.

Jane Cross, aged 35, dies after falling down the...

But why engineer two previous deaths anonymously, then try to kill her with a push?

Amidst her apologies, Erica had mentioned a rogue form that showed the lending of certain books to a university — books that appeared to have already been loaned to a different university. Handwritten notebooks, to be exact, containing logs of rainfall and sunshine from 1857 to 1933, of vital importance to climate researchers — and worth thousands to a collector.

Jane promised to look into the matter, guessing this might turn out to be another piece of evidence against Alan Franklin. After all, it was his signature on

the form. So she concentrated on this instead, trying to eradicate from her mind the other two Janes who had died.

Half-five arrived and Jane walked out to the car park at the rear of the library. A gleam of light on the Tarmac caught her eye and she bent down to pick up the £2 coin. From out of nowhere a car appeared, engine roaring wildly, tyres squealing for purchase, reversing madly towards her. She only just managed to throw herself to safety by her own car. The car stopped abruptly.

"Jane!" Alan Franklin leapt out, horrified, his eyes wide. "My word, I almost got you then. Are you all right?" He helped her up

“
Franklin fussed for a while longer, before eventually driving away
”

and made a great show of examining her for injuries.

"I'm fine," she said. "Fine, really." She stared at her boss, wondering whether the coin had been left deliberately to make her pause so he could...

Jane Cross, aged 35, dies in a tragic accident when...

But no, it was ludicrous. Why engineer two previous deaths, then try to kill her with his own car? Again it didn't fit the pattern. And again, Jane shook off her suspicions.

"Sorry, I wasn't concentrating," Franklin said. "Too distracted. It's this damned —" He sighed. "Are



you sure you're OK?"

Jane flexed her hand. "Just startled. No harm done."

Franklin fussed for a while longer, before eventually driving away. Jane too drove home, still shaky, but convincing herself that this whole murder plot was nonsense. If someone had gone to the trouble of making murder look like an accident — the ladder fall, then murdering anonymously — the hit-and-run, they weren't then going to commit the next murder in person, at work, in full view of...

The Taser hit her as soon as she opened her front door, throwing her to the hall carpet. "Drink this!" A bottle was forced against her lips.

She could feel her thoughts turning fuzzy. A face swam into her vision, the features blurred but recognisable. Kevin!

"Hello, Jane," he said. "You're going to be the third. I'm glad you live in a bungalow." He dragged her to the bathroom. "Don't have to carry you upstairs." He dumped her down. "I have it all set up. The mystery death. The sedatives. The drowning." He heaved her into the tub. She tried to struggle, but she could do little but flail uselessly. He turned on the taps and the tub began to fill.

"But... why?" she slurred.

"You know why." He made her drink from a tumbler, made sure her fingerprints were on it. "I've been selling items from the library, making it look like they're on loan or never existed in the first place. And making a tidy profit. So I can't have you stopping me."

The water was lapping against Jane's chest now.

"Didn't occur to me until today," he continued, "until I overheard you on the phone to your friend. Then I checked your browsing history and saw the articles about those other two Jane Crosses. They were nothing to do with me, but the police will make the connection if I mention them. Two deaths, a coincidence. Three form a pattern. And as far as they know, I have no motive. So they'll assume it's a serial killer." He laughed.

"Sorry, Jane." Kevin pushed her head down...

Jane awoke with a start. Amy, Alan Franklin, Erica, a nurse — and Charlie, too — were all by her bedside. Charlie, her rescuer, who now stroked her hair.

Charlie had arrived at her house to take her for a surprise meal. Finding the front door ajar, he'd heard Kevin's confession and tackled him into submission, then pulled Jane from the water.

"And Kevin?" she wheezed.

"Under arrest," said Charlie. "Fraud, theft, attempted murder."

"It's the theft Mr Franklin is most angry about." Erica laughed.

"I discovered something was up a couple of days ago." Franklin said. "Got me riled."

Well, that explained Franklin's bad mood recently. He wasn't the culprit, just an angry victim. "At least the story is different this time," said Amy, holding up a newspaper.

Jane Cross, aged 35, librarian, survives a brutal assault after a colleague...

Jane grinned. *Survives!* Yes, that was the important bit. *Jane Cross survives.*

THE END

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The Great Escape

If Helen had one wish, it would be for a Christmas when they all delighted in each other's presence, not in their presents. Time together — not exactly a lockdown, but more than a pit stop

None would have guessed that the residents of Number 14 Crescent Gardens were actually prisoners serving time. They seemed like such a nice couple, mowed lawn, trimmed hedge, grown children doing well, by all accounts. Helen was often spotted down the supermarket doing her shopping, and Mike was regularly tootling around town on his bike, looking quite fit for a retiree. Surely they were free and above reproach?

That's the thing about open prisons: they don't look like prisons. No locked gates, no barred windows. Prisoners come and go, but never very far, and they always return. They've served 24 years so far. An indeterminate sentence. They thought they were up for release when the last child went off to university, but he boomeranged back after graduation. He's finally found a job in London and moved out for good. Mike and Helen thought they'd earned a reprieve.

Last Christmas, all the children returned for an extended holiday season. They planned to reconnect with old school friends and looked forward to many nights in countless pubs, catching up. The house was full of their deep laughter late into the night when they and their

friends would return. They sat around the long kitchen table as they had a decade ago, made endless rounds of toast and downed cans of beer, reminiscing. Mike and Helen were woken by the party atmosphere downstairs, but were pleased the children were enjoying their break, and reaffirming old friendships.

The clearing up each morning did get a bit of a nuisance. Helen disliked the smell of stale beer and cigarette smoke. Mike was

family dinners back. Her efforts went unnoticed. No reward for good behaviour.

While she was stripping the turkey, eking out the last of its goodness to add to an asparagus and ham pie, Helen found herself cleaning off the wishbone. When the children were little, she used to get each boy to make a wish, wrapping a little finger around the ends to then pull it apart. The lad who won the larger piece was granted his wish...

“ *Her efforts went unnoticed. No reward for good behaviour* ”

irritated that adult offspring didn't have the decency to tidy up after themselves. He filled recycling bags with cans, while Helen got on with their porridge. As Christmas morphed towards New Year's, the long nights wore on. It felt a longer stretch than just a week. Disturbance to the parents' sleep began to take its toll. Helen was getting worn out cooking for the whole brood, late brunches and favourite treats for evening meals. Trying to get the vibe of their young

Helen had to stop dreaming of the past. If she won her wish now, what would it be? A Christmas that delighted in each other's presence, not presents. Time together, not exactly a lockdown but more than a pit stop. More than running a handy hangover infirmary. The chores required to sustain this adult facility should be fairly apportioned. Privileges should be earned. Kitchen duties, cleaning, laundry. If Helen could be released from her treadmill with a bit of coordinated help,

she might have enough energy for some genuine festive joy.

Rituals shackled them, Decorating The Tree, Staggering The Presents, Watching The Queen, The Boxing Day Walk, Greater Family Phone Calls (kept brief because there was a queue.) Everything was regimented. Especially smiling.

New Years' Eve clinched it. The couple were left on their own while the young ones celebrated in town. They felt used. They thought they were free, to relate as equals, adult to adult, to their offspring. Not a chance. Now they were being kept in isolation, sentenced to be custodians of the convenient Hotel Of Mum And Dad.

While the revellers downed shots in town, the couple plotted their escape. Next year, they'd book themselves away for New Year. A Day Release. Brighton. A nice package deal, good meal, entertainment, sea-front location. No rules, no chores. Their children could use the house in their absence, but they'd have to fend for themselves. Not surprisingly, they decided to make alternative arrangements. Mike and Helen had been a tad uneasy about making the offer, but relieved when the lads chose not to accept.

A night celebrating was not the couple's style. A quiet whiskey and Jools Holland on the telly, more like. In bed by 12:05. But coach parties filled their chosen refuge. The guests came well into a party mood. As midnight approached, the noise level increased. Everyone else was having a fine time. Mike and Helen knew they'd made a dreadful mistake. Like a pair of old lags, they couldn't cope with freedom. They slipped out into the Lanes, into a tiny pub with wood panelling and winged-back leather chairs. Whiskey as the clock chimed. No hats, no poppers. Perfect.

For all its awkwardness, their escape worked. Home is no longer a hotel. Old friends are welcomed, but quieter. No mess left. Parents taken out for brunch. No porridge. Released with a pardon, you might say.

THE END

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ILLUSTRATION: GETTY

They reached the door to Manhattan Melody Studios, Myrna and the guy, at exactly the same moment. He was walking from the north, she from the south. She knew that the most important thing in her life, right then, was to get through the door before him. Nobody should ever be late for an appointment with George Diski, and time was very short. Her bus had crawled along, passing every block as though the driver was giving the passengers opportunities to sightsee in New York. It was now very nearly two o'clock, and Myrna's career was absolutely on the brink.

"Thank you," she said emphatically, as she and the guy met at the top of the studio steps. "Just gotta nip in here..."

It was immediately clear that he hadn't noticed her because he turned, startled, a pair of large blue eyes opening wide. He'd already got hold of the long brass handle of the door because, annoyingly, it was on his side, and he was actually stepping through. A big clock on the wall of the foyer said three minutes to two, and Myrna knew that she had to throw aside good manners and get inside before the guy. He looked meek, even after a few seconds' acquaintance — he was no doubt some obedient backing musician, heading for a recording session. Whereas Myrna was on her way (maybe, just maybe!) to setting New York on fire with her songwriting. There was a priority here.

She clutched her sheaf of manuscript paper to her chest and shoved. She was tall and although he was taller, he was slender for a man. After a split second, Myrna found herself bursting through into the foyer with the guy nowhere in her field of vision.

"Thank you so much," she trilled to the air behind her. "Gotta dash."

As she veered left, towards the corridor of offices and studios, she saw the concierge jump up from his seat and turned instinctively to follow the direction of his gaze. There was the guy, flat on the floor,

S.A. Simple Tune



Myrna knew she had to throw aside good manners and get in the door before the guy standing in her way made her late. He was no doubt some obedient backing musician — whereas she was on her way to setting New York on fire with her songwriting

his face all screwed up, holding one wrist with the other hand. The leather case he'd been carrying, one of those old-fashioned things for sheet music, lay several feet away.

"You all right, John?" asked the concierge, and hurried over.

"Oh, gee, sorry," Myrna said, edging away towards the corridor. "Clumsy old me. You haven't hurt your wrist, right?"

She knew that she would burst into tears if this meeting didn't happen. Mr Diski didn't wait; there'd be another hopeful lining up shortly. If she'd broken some singer's arm and was too late, it would be a disaster. The DJ and record producer had agreed to hear one song, and that was really something.

Myrna had felt a sense of fate when the call had come in to the

flat she shared with her pal Olivia. She'd had a feeling that this was the start of it all.

"It's 1950," she had said to Olivia. "We're at the peak of the

**— “ —
If she had broken
some singer's
arm and was
late, it would
be a disaster**

century, and that's an omen."

Olivia had laughed at her, but it was obvious she was sharing the thrill of that life-changing

call from Manhattan Melody.

"More than that," Myrna went on, "Creatively, I am at a sweet spot. My songs have taken on a unique style for the first time."

"That, I can't deny," Olivia had said with a smile.

Diski had given her 10 minutes.

The guy on the floor of the lobby was looking down at his darned wrist.

"Tell me you're not a cornet player," she said with a weak laugh. "Tell me you don't need that hand to earn your bread."

"I'm a singer," he said, in a strained voice that told her he was in pain.

"Good," she said. "I mean... I'm glad you don't need the wrist."

The concierge gave her a look. "Will you be OK? That was what I meant to say," Myrna said. She knew she was being a heel,

but the clock had ticked round — two minutes to two. Myrna crouched beside the man and dumped her papers on the floor. He was about her own age — perhaps 30 — and she was going to have to seem concerned while at the same time getting out of there double-quick. "Silly of me," she said.

He was trying to right himself on his good arm. "It's OK." He smiled. It was an ordinary, good-guy smile, not a Sinatra smile like Danny's. Myrna was dating Danny Branco, up-and-coming star of musical theatre and genuine dish.

"Look, I've got a terrifically important appointment right now — with Mr Diski, you know. I write songs." It sounded like nothing as it came out of her mouth. Her songs, and this meeting, were her gateway to a new life. "If you just wait here, I will come back and —"

"Go, go," he interrupted.

"But have you broken something?"

The clock ticked. The concierge squatted down. "I'm thinking the ulna," he said, and Myrna glared at him.

"Oh no," the man on the carpet said. "Just a sprain, I guess."

"I'll make it up to you," Myrna said. "Um, give me your telephone number." It seemed the only thing that would get her into that corridor —

a promise of further sympathy. People exchanged numbers all the time in these situations, as a social nicety. Mostly they never actually had to call each other. The guy tried to raise his right hand, and winced again.

"No, no — of course you can't write your number," Myrna said quickly. "Let me give you mine." She looked round for something to write on, and of course there were her bits of songs on the floor. Myrna carried her songs around with her all the time, ready for the moment when a rhythm popped into her mind on a subway or while she typed.

She was also disorganised, and never got round to filing anything. Today, her boss had insisted she take a heap of papers away. They were clogging up the place, he said. Insurance offices were

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not the place for “bits of tunes and ink smudges”.

She grabbed one of the sheets that poked out from a cardboard folder.

That would do. It was covered in her black scrawls and she recognised the tune — an upbeat little thing from weeks ago. She’d liked it, but had switched to focussing on the tune she had picked out for George Diski, every note of which was etched onto her memory. The sheet tore as she tugged, leaving half of itself behind.

The clock on the wall said one minute to two as Myrna scribbled down her number. Her victim — had the concierge called him John? — had shuffled himself towards the wall as she wrote, and was propped up against it. She noticed his long, rather cat-like body, very dark hair and fine, sharp features. Her Danny was more of a Mario Lanza type — solid and awfully handsome. You had to have build, Danny said, as a singer, to reach the back of the dress circle.

“Thanks for being so sweet about this,” Myrna said. She clambered to her feet, picked up the papers and headed for the corridor. One minute later, the guy and his wrist were a distant memory.

Myrna had come to New York three years before, determined to make it as a songwriter. There were women writing music for theatre and for the major bands and recording stars, but not many. Myrna knew she had what it took, but so far fame had eluded her. Olivia, a childhood friend who worked in a high-class dress store on 57th Street, was her ally and supporter, and finally Myrna felt that her time

had come. This new song — the one for Mr Diski — was part of a sort of cycle — simple, catchy tunes that didn’t need the big orchestrations so popular that year, tunes that she could showcase by simply sitting at a piano and singing. The numbers were love songs that followed the turning of the seasons, which she knew was a neat idea — and a fresh one.

The appointment in George’s office just had to go well.

“Dress casual,” Olivia had said that morning. “Make it like you’re playing your song to several disc jockeys.”

“Liv, you’re wicked,” Myrna had said with a slightly hysterical laugh. But she had taken the idea on board and had worn checked Capri pants and a cotton jacket with the collar turned up, her long brown hair down so as to look casual. Except she really, really wasn’t feeling casual at all. George Diski was New York’s most popular DJ. Musicians also knew him as a producer. If George liked a song, he could arrange anything from a single guitar player to a symphony orchestra and choir within hours. Manhattan Melody had studios of all sizes ready to be powered up, just waiting for George’s word.

Later, Myrna hardly remembered her appointment with Mr Diski, she was so keyed-up. The great man didn’t move from behind the desk at any point. As soon as she entered the room, he indicated an ordinary upright piano in a corner, and Myrna focussed

on not shaking as she sat down. She did remember a mighty sense of relief when a brusque secretary knocked on the door at precisely ten minutes past two, announcing the next caller.

“Well, I want to thank you, Mr Diski,” Myrna said as she backed out of the room.

“OK,” the great man said. “Don’t forget your papers. There are more good numbers in there, maybe.”

As she stood at the bus stop, trembling, Myrna wondered if Mr Diski had really used that word — “good”. For the rest of the afternoon, hunched at her work station at the insurance office, she tried to remember.

The telephone rang as soon as she arrived back at the apartment at five. Olivia was home and Myrna barely had time to speak, before the telephone called out shrilly. For a second, Myrna stared at the black receiver.

“It’s unlikely to be Manhattan

— “ —
She wanted to lie on her bed and fantasise about records with her name on them

Melody this soon,” Olivia said with an encouraging smile. “*Summer On Eighth Street* is a good tune, but Diski sees a lot of people in an afternoon.”

“No, of course it can’t be.”

Myrna took a deep breath and picked up the phone.

“NYC 4-7-9-6,” she said in her best upstate accent.

“Hello? Is this the young lady I bumped into at Manhattan Melody?” a voice said.

For a moment, Myrna imagined some encounter with an acquaintance, then realised he meant an actual bumping. “Gosh, I’m sorry about that,” she said, without too much enthusiasm. She never thought he’d call, and golly, the guy was quick off the mark too! Myrna

felt tired. What she wanted was to take a bath and lie on her bed, fantasising about records with her name printed on the label. She’d been having a funny little daydream recently, one she’d like to reprise, about Danny hearing one of her numbers on the radio when they were together. He’d yell, “Honey! That’s your tune! You didn’t tell me Diski had taken it!” He’d take her in his arms and it would be wonderful.

“No apology needed,” the man with the sprained wrist said. “I was in too much of a rush. My mind was on the tenor part I hadn’t really studied enough for the rehearsal today.”

So he was a tenor. Myrna smiled. Tenors were trouble — she’d fallen in love with two of them since she’d come to the city. Both had been a disaster. Danny was a baritone.

“I guess I’m being cheeky calling you,” the voice continued after a moment, “but you said to call.” There was an awkward pause. “Something about, er, making it up to me.”

“Well, yes, I should buy you a drink,” Myrna said. “I really should. Can you use your drinking arm yet?”

“Not quite yet,” he said.

“I called in to Hope Hospital after the rehearsal and they put me in plaster, which is a drag.”

“Then you deserve that drink.”

He probably lived some place across the Hudson, Myrna thought. She could arrange to see him a week next Tuesday and the drink might never take place at all. Things might start moving quickly, if George had liked her song.

“I can meet you at Kevin’s Bar on 104th and 3rd,” he said. “How about tonight?”

Myrna wasn’t yet practised at making instant excuses to people who were desperate to know her. That was all to come. Anyway, the guy was sweet — most people in show business

pretended to be busy all the time just to look good, but this one didn't. And she had knocked him over.

"Sure," she said. Get it over and done with. "Can we say early? Six thirty?" She had a dinner date with Danny.

"Super," the guy said. "I'm John, by the way, John Duarte." "See you later, John."

Danny wouldn't have a problem with her getting a drink with a sessions singer. He was cool about things like that. Sometimes Myrna wished he'd be a little less cool. Danny was just dreamy — 26 and the perfect fit for a host of new musicals coming to Broadway. Neither of them cared that she was older. The point was that both of them were talented, both of them were on the brink of greatness, and they adored each other.

Kevin's Bar was one of those unadorned places with grumpy

bartenders but good beer. Myrna arrived second — she could see John Duarte at a corner table, looking eagerly around him. She wondered if, when Diski took her songs and she became famous, she'd miss places like this. She and Olivia had often hung out at such bars, enjoying themselves, meeting those attractive tenors, having fun. But then she thought she probably wouldn't.

She bought John his drink, but then he insisted on getting the next. She felt a little fuzzy — still tired after the stress of the day. She apologised again about his injury, and he laughed and waved his plastered hand about. He seemed like a nice guy. She wanted to make it up to him — she really did.

"So you write songs?" he asked. "I do. And do you know, John?" She leaned over her glass. "I am going to write one for you, because I pushed you."

He looked delighted. "I'm busy now. Things happening, you know?" she said. "But I will — I'll write something super. Give me your number. Don't call me, I'll call you." She laughed. "Bet you've heard that a few times, right, after auditions? I'll call you when I have something."

"That would be the best result of being shoved that I can think of, Miss O'Brien," he said.

"Myrna," she said. "Please call me Myrna."

She wound up being a little late for her date with Danny. Climbing into a cab to head downtown, she made a mental note to write something for John Duarte, because he'd been nice. She also made a note to get a diary, or at least a notebook to write down tasks like this one in. Olivia was always saying what a mess she lived in, how she forgot stuff.

By the time Myrna reached the southern edge of Central Park, thoughts of Danny filled up her mind. Myrna never bought a diary or a notebook.

George Diski liked the song. Myrna had known he would. He asked her to bring in more, and that just made her heart sing, because she had the whole cycle of 12 songs ready (or as

near ready as could be).

"I'm seeing Laura Klein tomorrow about these songs," Diski said when they next met, and Myrna only just stopped herself from shrieking. Laura Klein was the hottest of hot tickets. George knew what he was doing — Laura's rich, emotional voice would bring her songs to life.

Over the next two years, Myrna made a lot of money. She had found a vein in popular music and bled it joyfully. She and

— “ —
*Myrna was older
 and therefore not
 such a great fit as
 a ‘public’
 girlfriend*

Danny saw quite a lot of each other. He was charming, and funny, and popular — everybody loved him and he was terribly busy. Myrna knew that marriage wasn't on the cards yet for them. A rising star like Danny Branco would be wise to stay single — the female fans liked it that way. Myrna was older, too, and therefore not such a great fit as a 'public' girlfriend. Myrna understood — she was in show business too. He was seen with every pretty new female star of the stage, and Myrna was fine about that. That was business.

She bought a large apartment and held parties. She wrote and wrote. Life was wonderful.

Two more years passed, and in the summer of 1954, Myrna began to have anxieties about her relationship with Danny. At about the same time, her writing started to give her some trouble.

"Is it chicken and egg, d'ya think?" Myrna asked Olivia. "Does me and Danny being a little shaky make my tunes dry up? Or does Danny think less of me because I haven't published so much this year?"

"That'd be pretty shallow

of Danny," Olivia said.

"Oh, I put that all wrong!" Myrna said. "Of course Danny's a darling. I just mean... oh, it's hard to say."

"Take a holiday," Olivia said. "I can mind your cat."

Myrna and Olivia no longer shared an apartment. A year after her first success with Diski, Myrna had bought her heart's desire near the park, a place with high ceilings. Olivia stayed in the apartment they'd rented together, and Myrna wondered if Olivia was more disappointed about that than she said. She had found another roommate for a while, but that hadn't worked out, so she'd downsized.

Soon after Myrna bought her new apartment, she hired a maid. Danny had advised it.

"Nobody could pretend," he had said with a laugh, "that you are any kind of housekeeper."

Lucy was a smiling Chinese woman who did wonders. Myrna paid her a ridiculously high salary — it was the first time she'd ever hired anybody and she felt a mild sense of embarrassment. She often apologised about the mess, too.

"Just leave all the stuff on the piano," Myrna said. "One day I'll get around to sorting out all the papers, but leave them for now."

They got along, she and Lucy, which was nice. That helped Myrna during some busy times, when things were harder.

Myrna was unwell for a while. She and Danny fought about nothing. She stopped eating properly, and Olivia eventually gave up nagging her to get a square meal. She got all kinds of bugs, and went to a therapist because she felt overwhelmed. Things seemed awry.

Then, that autumn, Danny stole her music. She heard him interviewed one evening on the radio, live, by a DJ on one of the big stations. He was being amiable as usual — the Danny she knew and loved — and she smiled as she listened. His amusing chat reminded her of how they used to be together. At the end of the interview, the DJ tried to persuade Danny to sing something, right there and then, for the show's audience of (mostly) young women.

"Well, OK, Tom," Myrna heard



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him say to the DJ. "I'll be truly terrible, you know that?"

"I doubt that," said the DJ, who had a chuckle in his voice.

Myrna knew it was all planned. Singing stars rarely gave impromptu performances. There would have to be the right microphone on hand, and Danny would have demanded that he do preparation.

There was a short pause, and a piano started up.

"This a new number?" the DJ asked over a gentle, rambling intro, making it hard for Myrna to hear the melody. She noticed that it was Tom Berner, a well-known name.

"Sure is," Danny said, and he began to sing.

It was one of her songs, one of a new cycle that she'd been slaving over. Writing these songs had been hard. Tunes and harmonies no longer flowed from her like water from a faucet. She felt that, if she ever gave birth, it might just be easier than squeezing out a fresh love song. But she knew they were, finally, very good indeed.

Danny sang the song nicely, though not quite as she'd intended it. He had a tendency to syncopate where syncopation wasn't written. Myrna frowned. She was puzzled — more than puzzled; a cold lump was forming in her chest. This was her music and Danny had made no mention that he might use it. She hadn't even realised that he knew his way around the messy piles of manuscripts on the piano. That's where he must have come across it. He had been at her apartment less than two days ago.

It was a short number. When it ended, Myrna waited for Danny

to say, "That was written by my good friend, the lovely and very talented Myrna O'Brien."

But he didn't make any comment. Instead, Berner said, close to the microphone, "So, listeners, get yourself to a record store in a fortnight and be the first to get a copy of *Come Back*,



Baby. What a great little song!"

Danny telephoned her the next morning and he said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to have dinner with Myrna that night. He had a lot on his plate.

"Like radio interviews?" she asked acidly.

There was a silence on the end of the line. "I didn't think you tuned into that station."

"That's my song, Danny. I'd have been happy for you to sing it, though it's really a female number, but... you must have taken the music from my apartment, Danny."

She didn't like the sound of her own voice; it was shrill in her ears, so she brought the tone down. Whatever this was, she told herself, it could be sorted out. "Honey, let's talk about this. I'm flattered you like it, but —" "I'm releasing an album," he interrupted, his tone clipped. "Tom Berner's producing."

Myrna was surprised at his change of tack. "Well, that's great, Danny. In between those two Broadway shows, it'll be a great way to fill the gap."

"I'm releasing an album of that song, and the others."

"The others?" Myrna thought. A dismissive phrase to describe her labour of love, her 10 beautiful songs.

"Danny, you should have asked me before you offered those songs to Berner," she said. This was bizarre. "But I guess it could be OK. I've almost finished them. When should I go visit Mr Berners to talk —"

"I'm down as the composer," he said.

Myrna struggled to process the words. "You can't do that. Why would you want to?"

"Listen, I'm sorry. But you pretty much wrote them for me, didn't you?"

"No, Danny, I wrote them for —" She had written them for herself. All that work had been to ensure she could still do it. She'd had no particular singer in mind.

"It's a cut-throat world out there," Danny went on. Myrna could almost hear him trying to edge himself out of the conversation. "Take it as a compliment, Myrna,"

She felt sick. "Danny, why

would you do this to me? Me, of all people? We're together."

"You know that's not been true for a while. We have dinner; sometimes I visit your messy apartment. That's not 'together'. I've looked after you, ever since we met, but —"

"Looked after me?"

"But all good things come to an end."

Myrna slumped into a chair, feeling as though her knees might snap if she didn't. Her thoughts raced. "I'll sue, Danny," she croaked into the receiver.

"But you don't have the

— “ —
Myrna slumped into a chair, feeling as if her knees might snap if she didn't

manuscripts, Myrna." His voice was infuriatingly soft and patronising. "You really shouldn't work like you do — one copy in that black scrawl. I had copies made, without your signature on 'em, and I got rid of the originals. It was kinda dumb not to take your own copies. I guess that's a lesson."

She scrambled to her feet, stumbled to the piano and leaned heavily on it. The piles — her piles of disorganised order — did look different. Under the pencil and eraser that she always used, under the stack of blank paper, there was nothing. That was where she had put them, covering them up in a kind of protective way. Danny had heard the songs and he knew where to look.

The phone receiver still lay on the floor, its curled cable stretched across the floor from the telephone. Myrna ignored it. Branco could hang up when he chose to — she wasn't going to pay him the compliment of ending the conversation. She got herself a glass of wine and thought it through. It was true, nobody else had seen the songs, so nobody knew they were hers.

But she could make a court understand that they were hers.

She found a lawyer, a show-business specialist that Olivia tracked down. Olivia had come over, that dreadful night, and had sat up most of it with Myrna, listening to the story over and over again, giving sympathy and advice. Myrna batted most of it away, she was so stressed.

Then, right before her appointment with the lawyer, Danny appeared on the radio again. Olivia called Myrna at a few minutes past the hour.

"The jerk is on the same station again, Myrna," she yelled down the line. "Switch on!"

Myrna ran to her radio set. "...Yes, Tom, I sure hate it when a rumour like that goes around," Danny was saying. "New York feeds on gossip, especially in our business — it's a crying shame."

"It's been said that some of these tunes were actually written by your friend — can I say more than friend? — Myrna O'Brien —"

"Myrna!" interrupted Danny in his smooth baritone. "I adore that woman. We've never actually dated, and a part of me regrets that to my very toes. She is quite a gal, and my senior by some years, so a source of advice for me since the very start."

"But these rumours, Danny?"

"Me and Miss O'Brien, or the music?"

"Let's stick with the music."

"Myrna's talented — very much so. She's still got talent."

Myrna brought her fist down on the table. The manipulative rat! He was making her sound like a pathetic has-been!

"She has been talking," Danny continued, "about wanting to make something new, about a move away from her old styles and habits because — you know as well as I do, Tom — we all gotta keep moving in this game! Myrna has to earn her crust. She did hear one or two of these numbers when I sung them to her at a little gathering, and she loved them." He sighed. The microphone gave a little bump as his breath hit it. "But no, she didn't write 'em, Tom." Myrna heard his voice get warmer, closer to the microphone. "Listen, she's wonderful, and I wish her good luck. That's all

I want for my friends."

Myrna thought of her stack of manuscript paper, her thousands of crotchets and quavers, and she cried with fury, "Heard one or two!" She had sweated every note out of her very pores. Danny had manipulated her. He had pre-empted her attempts to prove him a thief. The public would buy all the nonsense he was churning out.

Her show-business lawyer, unfortunately, agreed. He sucked his teeth and said that, in all honesty, she might be better to let this one go.

"If," he said, "Mr Branco didn't author most of this work —"

"He didn't 'author' a single bar of it," Myrna said. She was beginning to dislike the lawyer after only 10 minutes. He'd called her 'little lady' when talking to his assistant. "Bring this little lady whatever she'd like to drink."

The lawyer's fat hands lay between them on his desk. "Well, he's painted a very full picture of the situation — falsity, yes, but full of detail. And with no evidence... You've no... vestiges of these songs?"

She shook her head.

"Mr Branco is a pretty big name these days, Miss..."

He consulted his notes.

"Miss O'Brien."

Myrna felt as though she was vanishing. This lawyer had never heard of her, or he was pretending he hadn't — and he certainly didn't want to represent her. He probably didn't even think she was telling the truth! DJs on all the stations were talking about the new album about to be recorded by Danny Branco. Myrna could think of no way out.

Back home, she washed her face and tried to calm down. If she could write that cycle of songs, she thought, she could write another. What was left to her was talent and dedication.

She became angry, and then despairing, and then angry again. She yelled at the lawyer as she lay in her bed; she wrote a dozen confrontational notes to Danny, planned a dozen phone calls, and gave up on all of them. She wrote an article for a well-

known music magazine, laying bare what Danny Branco had done and what a criminal he was. The editor returned it with a polite note in which he made vague noises about 'litigation' and 'what our readers like to see'. Myrna began to lapse into a kind of stupor, and lived off coffee and crackers in the apartment. The newspapers covered the release of Danny's new album, and — to add insult to injury — some of them mentioned her authorship 'claims' as a kind of added titillation. The world seemed to view her as the bitter older

— “ —
That manipulative rat! He made her sound like a pathetic has-been!

girlfriend of a star, who was taking out her bile on poor Danny Branco. Mentions were also made of Danny's new squeeze, a young singer from Milwaukee who did a marvellous line in cowgirl songs, complete with yodelling. Olivia came round often. "At least you can make songs out of this horror," she said. "Call it The Misery Cycle! You'll wind up with a Gold Disc."

Myrna didn't find it funny. Nothing was funny. "I don't know when I'll find another tune in here," Myrna told her, tapping her own head.

Olivia came when Myrna called. She made endless coffee, listened, cajoled and suggested, but after a few weeks Myrna noticed that her friend came less

often. Her job, she explained, was busier. Myrna wondered if she, Myrna, was being a bore. That was probably true, she thought, but if a friend was loyal — if she had integrity, she would not give up. Danny lacked integrity. He didn't know the meaning of the word.

She called Olivia one night, very late. Olivia sounded sleepy. "Where have all the good people gone?" Myrna asked. She had enjoyed a glass or two of wine that night. "Why are they so mean?"

"Go to bed, Myrna."

"You don't care," Myrna said.

"Where is your integrity, Liv?"

Olivia hung up. Myrna stared at the phone. Even her best friend wasn't willing to stick by her, except when good times rolled. People wanted things, they never kept their promises. They took rather than gave.

A few days later, Lucy put her head round the door of Myrna's sitting room. "Miss O'Brien," she said. "Can I have a word?"

Myrna beckoned her inside. "After all this time, Lucy, you can surely call me Myrna?" It still made Myrna uncomfortable, having paid help. Lucy was kind, loyal and worked beyond the call of duty. As Lucy came shyly into the room, Myrna was reminded that her maid was a pearl in the otherwise gritty, empty oyster of New York life.

"I would like to give in my notice, Miss O'Brien," Lucy said.

Myrna stared. "Notice?"

"I got another job."

"But Lucy, aren't you happy?"

"I guess work is work, Miss O'Brien."

"They're going to pay you more than I do?"

Lucy nodded.

It wasn't long before Myrna found out that Lucy's new job was working for Danny Branco's new companion, the cowgirl with the golden plaits and the 20-inch waist. Myrna was at her hairdresser's when an acquaintance told her that Danny was doing all kinds of things to help her out.

"She's very new in town," the acquaintance explained. "Very green."

"Not as green as all that,"

A Simple Tune

Myrna said.

She was getting a headache under the dryer. Everyone, apparently, lacked principles. She left the salon feeling low.

It was busy out in the street. Just ahead she saw two young men, hurrying in opposite directions, collide. One of them went flying against a street lamp and the other fell into the path of oncoming pedestrians. Myrna was obliged to stop walking, because a minute or so of chaos ensued. Everyone — both the guys and everyone caught up in the incident — was good-humoured. There was a lot of laughter and brushing of clothes. Myrna came alongside as the second man got himself upright. He glanced at her, over the shoulder of an old lady who was fussing about him going to the emergency room. His eyes were very blue, and a memory flashed into Myrna's mind of another blue-eyed man sprawled on the ground, another long, lean body uncurling itself to get up again. Of course! It had been at Manhattan Melody — half a lifetime ago, it felt like. The man — John, was it? — was bent, in her memory, over half a sheet of her manuscript paper, looking at the telephone number she'd written in a corner. Myrna walked on, humming a tune, the tune she knew for certain was written on the other half sheet. She must have taken it away with her and dumped it on her piano, to be lost in the chaos. It had been in F major, she remembered, a key that made her happy, and there had been a great climax in the chorus. But for the life of her she could not remember the chorus. How had it gone? Her hum

turned into singing as she turned a corner. She sang the verse over and over, but she knew already, with a sinking heart, that it was no use trying to reconstruct it. She was a composer who relied on bursts of inspiration going down onto the page. That chorus had been perfect, and poking around, recycling the verse melody into some shadow of the great reprise, would be fruitless.

Myrna saw that she was only a few blocks away from Manhattan Melodies, and she wondered about calling in on George. She'd heard he was still working, though mostly retired now. Surely George would still be kind to her when lovers and friends were shallow and failed to keep their word. George was solid.

He was actually in the lobby of MMS, taking to the same concierge. Both of them were a few years greyer, more hunched.

"George," she said. He turned and smiled, and was about to come over and greet her, but Myrna raised a hand. "Do you like this one?" she asked, and sang her verse. It even made her foot tap, and at the end of it she found herself smiling. The

face of the guy she'd met here was clearer in her

mind, now that she was standing in the actual doorway where she'd bowled him over. He'd had dark hair with no Brylcreem. He also had a Spanish name, she recalled, something to do with Eva Perón. A photograph of Perón lurked in the back of her memory vault. Or was it Carmen Miranda?

George was frowning. "Sing it again, Myrna," he said. "You always had a nice voice."

"But the melody, George?" she insisted. Again, she sang it. The concierge's mouth twitched into smile, and his fingers tapped on the counter.

— “ —
Maybe she could reunite the halves of the sheet and remake the whole song?

"You just wrote that one?" George asked. "Are you churning out the good stuff again?"

"It's an old one — from way back, before you took my first songs, George."

"Well, bring the rest of it to me," George said. He sounded casual, but Myrna knew the suggestion was no throw-off. If he didn't like a tune, he always said so; if he heard something in it, he acted. George Diski had the best ear in America.

"I will, George," Myrna said.

Back at her apartment, deep among the manuscripts that Danny Branco had pushed aside in his eagerness to rob her, Myrna found the torn sheet. It ended after 15 bars with a jagged edge. A crazy plan began to form in her mind. She could — just maybe, in a fantasy outcome — reunite the halves of the sheet and remake the whole song. She was even more certain, staring at the notes, that if she tried to bolt on new melodic ideas, the exercise would fail and she'd have created a pale imitation.

Duarte! That had been his name — it was the maiden name of Eva Perón! How many John Duartes could there be in New York City?

As she scabbled to find the telephone directory (cursing Lucy, who had tidied, and who had left her), Myrna stopped suddenly. How likely was it that this man had kept a tatty old piece of paper? She looked up at the row of record industry awards, each of them framed and hanging on the wall, and thought that maybe it wasn't so impossible. He was in the business — a backing singer, as she recalled. He'd have spotted pretty quickly, following that drink at Kevin's Bar, that George had taken her work and published it. He might have stored it away with an idea of making a future profit. That's what a guy like Danny Branco would have done. If Duarte still had it, she'd buy it from him. She'd haggle, if necessary; she'd spend whatever she had. Myrna felt that the song was like a spark for a campfire — if you could just get a flame going, you might build a blaze.

There were two John Duartes, and one was a tailor in The Bronx. She called the other. As the dial clicked round, she remembered that he'd given her his number in the bar and she had never glanced at it again. They'd had a bargain, of sorts — she had made a promise and had forgotten it.

"Miss O'Brien," he said at the other end of the line. "How nice to hear from you. It's been a while."

He was talking, Myrna thought, as though they were old friends. It was odd, but it was nice, especially after the time she'd had lately. A friend was what she needed.

"Mr Duarte." Myrna hesitated. She had been about to say something like, "I always meant to call and apologise that I never wrote that tune". That would have been the way to start. But she knew it was a lie, or mostly a lie, and people had lied to her too much. She ought to try showing some integrity herself.

"I was wondering something pretty crazy," she said, and explained in simple terms

that she had given him a piece of a song with her phone number, and that she hoped he still had it somewhere.

He said that yes, he did have that scrap of manuscript paper and yes, he would meet her again at Kevin's.

Myrna had not remembered him being so attractive. She remembered the leanness, the dark hair and blue eyes, but he was handsome, with an open, charming smile and a loose, fascinating way of moving his body. But she had been in love with Danny at that time; presumably she hadn't noticed other guys. That had been dumb.

"I think you drank martinis when we were last here," he said.

"I'm impressed at your memory," Myrna said. She studied his face as he leaned over the bar, trying to get attention. He would already, probably, have worked out what she wanted and what he might ask for. The charm oozing from him was probably the opening gambit in a tough negotiation. This, after all, was New York and the music industry. She didn't blame him — he had what she wanted and held the cards. In a way, it was Danny all over again, though she hoped Duarte was less of a cad. Myrna was used to people getting what they wanted from her. Even Lucy had taken the over-generous salary and then quit on her. And Olivia had dissolved into the background when Myrna didn't offer good value as a companion.

He talked. He asked her about how she was doing. They chatted about singers and shows. Myrna stuck to the one drink this time — it was best to keep a clear head. A whole hour sped by in conversation, until she had to stop and remind herself what she was here for — to get the song.

"So, John," she said.

"Myrna." The clear blue eyes met hers, and she thought how sad it was that they were about to get down to what the British called 'brass tacks'. He was delightful, and (unlike Danny) he was her own age.



"The piece of paper we're here to discuss," she said.

He blinked. "Oh yes, sure," he said. "I clean forgot in all the talk." He bent to pick up the same music case she recalled spinning across the Manhattan Melody floor, that fateful day. He opened it, took out a dog-eared half sheet of her familiar ivory manuscript paper, and handed it over. For a moment, Myrna was taken aback.

"And what do you want?" she asked.

He looked puzzled. "You mean, another beer? I don't think I will, because —"

"No, I mean —" Myrna stared at him. It dawned on her, suddenly and astonishingly, that he was after nothing. He was giving her the song.

"I really should have studied this more closely," he was saying. "I just assumed it was nothing, because you used it to write a telephone number. That was dumb of me, because I played it

last night, and I'd like to hear the rest very much." He smiled. "I think I got the best half. If the verse is better, it's going to sell like hot cakes. I hope it works out for you, Miss O'Brien. Of course I've followed your career, which is why I kept it. As a souvenir."

Myrna saw a faint blush spread above his shirt collar. The sight of it made her want to burst into tears. She took a deep breath. "John," she said, "I behaved so very badly back then."

He blinked again. Myrna went on. "I injured you, and then — far worse, of course — I failed to keep my promise to write you a song."

"I never really expected a busy woman like —"

"I was wrapped up in myself," she interrupted him, "and my ambition. My integrity flew out of the window. Many people have treated me badly since then. If I'd known then what I know now —" Then she did start crying. He laid a cool, smooth hand over hers.

"Myrna. Don't cry."

"It's not that I'm sad," she said, snuffling. "It's that I regret it so. And I haven't had someone treat me like you've treated me for a long time. I've got used to folks taking, not giving. I thought that you'd ask for money."

"But it's your song."

A smile spread across her face. What a beautiful, simple,

— “ —
He was talking as if they were old friends. It was odd, but it was nice all the same

wonderful reply!

"I only wanted your phone number," he said, "really."

"It might become a valuable asset," Myrna said.

"But not my asset," he said, and picked up her glass. "Can I get you another of those?"

She waited at the table,

feeling astonishingly light and buoyant, and so different from the way she'd felt in months that it made her dizzy — and on one drink. When John returned to the table, he said, "Would it be impertinent of me to ask for a dedication?"

Myrna burst out laughing. "Of course! Your name all over the sheet music, all over the record label!"

"All over the bills when it becomes the Act One closer in a Broadway show." He was laughing.

"That, too. I promise I will credit you, and this time I will keep my promise."

"But I wasn't thinking just my name," he said shyly. "I was wondering if you could put — and maybe this will only work on the sheet music — *From Myrna to John. With love.*"

He looked up and their eyes met.

She swallowed. 'Why not?' she thought. 'Why not put just that?' Life was short and here was a peach of a man wanting her to say she loved him. "No," she said softly. "That's not impertinent at all. That's what I will write."

Myrna didn't get home until midnight. Even though Manhattan was cold, they took a long walk along the river. He escorted her back to the apartment and she stood in the elevator with the touch of his kiss still on her lips. The next morning, she taped together two halves of the song, and played it at the piano. Then she called Olivia, her best friend. "Liv," she said. "I am so sorry."

There was a pause at the other end. Myrna continued. "I have been selfish, and self-absorbed, and boring and uninterested in you when you showed such interest in me."

"Shall I come over?" Olivia said. "I have all kinds of news. It's been too long."

"Do. Come now. Can you? I have news, too."

Myrna was certain that she had the best news of her life to share. She had met a man who was true, and if she could be true as well, what future might lie ahead of her?

THE END

© Alison Carter, 2018

What am I doing here? I asked myself as I wheeled my case into the hallway of my brother's house. "Do you have any wine, Reverend?"

"Yes, in the fridge," my oh-so-perfect brother replied.

I suspected the fridge would be laid out like a health inspector's instruction manual, a bit like the rest of The Vicarage.

I was visiting over Christmas. Honestly, I'd be glad to see the rear end of this year. After splitting up with my ex, I'd moved in with my dad and his lady friend. Only, over the festive season they'd decided to fly off to the Canaries to get a tan. My brother had advised me that I shouldn't act like a gooseberry and beg them to take me too. I surprised him no end when I resisted the urge. The thing he didn't know was, my ex, now selling the house we used to share, kept calling me about silly little details — like who was viewing the place. So much so, I fantasised about him doing it on purpose. I couldn't tell my brother I had ulterior motives for staying in the country, could I? He spent half of his time trying to save me from myself already.

In the hall of The Vicarage, his perfect, blonde children did a fly-by. "Hello, Auntie Gale." I swear they're like a couple of robots.

His wife Sandy appeared next. She's as wholesome as freshly-baked bread. "How are you?" she asked with a furrowed brow.

I'm having evil thoughts. 'Sandy,' I thought, 'I want to flood the last office building I had an interview in because they didn't give me a job. I want to rush round to my ex's place, strip him naked then do naughty things. I'm even resisting an urge right now to mess up your hair.'

"I need some wine." I left my case behind and trotted through into a kitchen straight out of a show home. In the fridge, I did find sanctuary. David found me pouring it into the biggest glass I could find.

"I was thinking," he said. "You still don't have a job and we could use all the help we can get..."

Oh Lor, where is this going? "It'd be pretty basic stuff — peel a few spuds, prepare some sprouts. Do some washing-up. You don't have to mingle with our clientele if you don't want to."

Does he think he's running a five-star restaurant now?

"Sorry. I can't help with...the homeless... David. I can't cope with other people's misery as well as my own. Besides, I'm not like you. I'm not one of life's do-gooders."

My brother, who looks more like a male model than a C of E vicar, gave me the sternest look he could muster. "You are a good person. You need to believe it, I keep telling you."

I'm not, you know. My ex had called me boring when we split up, then he'd corrected himself and said he was bored instead. After I'd over-analysed our time together, I didn't disagree with him. The truth was, we'd both begun to snore our way through our relationship — the same routine every day, no hanky-panky, I think we counted excitement as watching a film instead of a documentary.

In my brother's kitchen, I slugged down rather a lot of wine. 'Hang on a minute,' I thought. 'Maybe a nice anecdote about how I saved a few lost souls from sleeping rough might make me seem like less of a drudge to my ex.'

"Me, help the homeless, David?" I said. "Actually, you could be right. This

“ Not surprisingly, the homeless turned out to be a sad little lot ”

could be my salvation."

Not surprisingly, the homeless turned out to be a sad little lot. They were all big coats, pale faces and woolly hats. They drifted in and out of the church hall on the day I volunteered. I manned the kitchen with Maud, Julie and young Simone. I'd calculated two stints at being wonderful would be enough to make me seem a more exciting

Seco Hel

My ex had called me boring when we split up and the truth was that we'd both begun to snore our way through our relationship. The same old routine every day...

and well-rounded person. Only then one of the homeless dropped a plate on the floor and Maud, Julie and Simone all looked at me. Since I'd volunteered last, apparently I was head of dirty jobs.

I attacked the pile of food and

Rose And Crown for a while, and the Dog And Gun."

"Oh, right. So — if you don't mind me asking — why are you here now?"

His puppy-dog eyes filled with pain. "I lost my job and my home. I didn't have any savings, or family, or friends who weren't more into taking than giving. I don't have any benefits right now. It seems the system's designed to create delays. Plus, they decided I'd made myself voluntarily homeless when my ex asked me to leave."

Coldness seeped into my bones. What if my dad hadn't taken me in when Jack asked me to go, I wondered? What if my brother wasn't The Second Coming and just decided one day to stop dealing with all my self-pity and drama? A hundred more 'what ifs' collided in my head. "Where are you staying tonight?" I asked.

"If I can't get a bed in a hostel, I'll have to sleep under the railway bridge."

and pings

"But it's freezing outside."

"I know, but what choice do I have? Hopefully things will get better soon. When my money comes through, I'm going to try to get a place in a shared house. It'll be another couple of weeks, I think. Once I have a home address again, I'll stand a better chance at getting a job."

"In that case... I... better give you some more mash."

Yes, Gale, potatoes will be a big help. If I'd been him, I'd have given some sarcastic retort. Instead, he smiled. "Thanks ever so much for everything you're doing here for us."

I gulped as my chest tightened. I felt like such a heel.

I did pile food up on his plate. I fed him like a starving lion, then I took him seconds. I sat at his table too and nattered on. It seemed his life had had a shape, a plan, until his feet had been yanked right out from under him.

I thought about Jack then and the night I'd left. I'd carried a black bin bag full of my stuff out the door as I snuffled into a tissue. I do like a bit of revenge, but the kind that came to mind now would actually be as sweet as a slab of Christmas cake.

Gale, you're turning into Mother Teresa.

I hate ringing a doorbell I used to own. At my ex's place, I did

just that later that afternoon.

When Jack opened up, he blinked in surprise. Though we did speak a lot on the phone, we never met face to face. I wondered if his heart galloped

“Chris disappeared inside. Then Jack glared at me like a rabid dog”

along as fast as mine.

"Still no takers?" I nodded towards the *For Sale* board perched at the end of the front yard.

"No," he replied. "I doubt there will be until spring now."

"I won't need that long. Two weeks will do. You did used to live in a house-share when you were younger, didn't you, Jack? You're used to getting along with people you don't know. Plus, technically, even though you paid most of the mortgage here, I did contribute a bit so.. at least one room here is mine, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?" He looks very cute when he's confused. He looked less so after I explained. "You want me to take in a complete stranger?"

"He's not that strange. Plus David will vouch for him. His

name's Chris. He's not into drugs or drink. I wouldn't bring just any old homeless man to you."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "You fancy him, don't you?"

What? No. Just how shallow do you think I am?"

At least he didn't laugh at me looking all offended. I expected him to turn all logical next and start asking questions, 'Why can't your brother take him in, or even your dad?' He didn't say a word. Maybe jealousy had blinded him to logic. My heart did a little leap like a spring lamb in a field at the thought. The idea of having my wicked way with him barged back into my head. I felt so conflicted, since this was my sweet revenge for him kicking me out. "What do you want to bet that I don't fancy him, Jack? How about two weeks free room and board?"

His eyes just about crossed, not a good look even on him. "No, Gale. No."

I ignored him; I stood motioning like somebody trying to guide a plane down onto a landing strip. I was actually

trying to coax Chris out of my car at the kerb. He did climb out, reluctantly carrying his meagre possessions. When Jack saw him, his eyes widened and he muttered in shock. "He looks a lot like my dad."

"Ah, yes! I knew he reminded me of somebody."

Chris, 60-ish, grey-haired and pink-cheeked, shuffled on over. "I'm sorry about all this. If you don't want me to stay, I fully understand."

"Where are you sleeping tonight, Chris?" I cut in. "Under the railway bridge? And what's the forecast — three inches of snow, isn't it?" I raised my brows at my ex.

Jack muttered, "I really don't believe you've done this, Gale."

"It's not boring though, is it?" I pointed out. Yes, stick that on your Christmas pudding

and set it on fire.

He frowned, dithered for another 10 seconds then motioned us inside. "The spare room's at the top of the stairs, Chris. There are some towels in the airing cupboard, if you want a shower." Seeing Chris' puppy dog eyes well up made Jack bite at his lip. He even gave Chris' shoulder a little pat as, still thanking him, Chris disappeared inside. Then Jack glared at me like a rabid dog.

"He's only homeless because his ex threw him out after he lost his job. Does that sound familiar?"

"Is that where this came from? I would never have done that to you. I knew you had somewhere to go. Surely you know how much I care about you." His mouth slapped closed. Had he meant to share that sentiment so openly?

I think he did, you know.

I might be crass and I'm definitely petty but, right then, I did want to be good... for him. "Are your parents in the Alps for Crimbo this year? If all your other friends are busy, we could volunteer at the church hall for a few hours on Christmas Day, then we could have a bit of a do here. We could play charades and watch a Bond film... just the three of us together."

He considered this suggestion for a moment. "That actually doesn't sound too terrible."

"No, it doesn't, does it?" "It's not over, is it Jack?" I thought. 'We just need to... surprise each other now and again'. "Oh, one more thing." I pulled out some mistletoe from my pocket. I held it aloft while looking sultry and alluring, I hoped.

"All I want is what you just gave a complete stranger, Jack. Is a second chance too much to ask for?" I'd seen the lopsided smirk he wore before. "You're picturing me naked now, aren't you?"

"I'm not going to kiss you," he snapped.

"Oh. OK."

"We have company. Let's wait until we're alone, shall we? In case things get out of hand."

"Oh. Right. Good point."

I laughed. "Happy Christmas!"

THE END

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Pizza

for Supper

After they'd eaten, Bill said, "You finish the wine. I'll run the bath and sort this lot out."

There wasn't much for him to do, though, as he'd seen how tired she was and suggested they order pizza and that she have an early night. Maria enjoyed the rest of her glass in the bath, among the mountain of scented bubbles he'd created. She was so lucky, despite what people said.

"He seems shifty," Dad said.

In a way, he was right — Bill did shift-work for a security firm.

"He made mistakes in his past, but who hasn't?" she'd said.

Dad sometimes accused her of being 'a soft touch' because, like Bill, she sympathised with people in trouble and tried to help. Like him, she'd been taken advantage of. Bill had been deceived just once, but on a far greater scale. He was now working hard to get out of debt and build a future for them.

Her dog Jock hadn't been keen on Bill, either. "He's just jealous," Bill said. "Who can blame him? He's had you to himself and doesn't want to share." He'd said the same about her friends when they'd urged caution. Some claimed they'd seen Bill in 'suspicious' situations. They simply didn't understand his job. But then, neither did she.

"I don't want you worrying about me," he'd told her.

Cherry, her new stepmother, was more positive. "Bill's good-looking and very charming."

Maria told herself that wasn't just because Cherry was glad she'd moved out. Until Bill had suggested she rent a flat for them, Maria hadn't considered she might be in the way.

By the time Maria got out the bath, Bill had a warm towel ready to dry her.

"Good idea about having an

early night," she said, giving an inviting smile.

"Sorry, I have to go. Didn't I say?" He looked so apologetic. "Staff meeting. The boss has ideas about expanding the business and wants my input."

Maria was so proud. He'd not been working there long and already he was considered important by the manager. She snuggled into bed and was almost asleep when her phone beeped. The text was from Bill.

“She snuggled into bed and was almost asleep when her phone beeped”

'Hello gorgeous,' it began. He always called her that. When he said it, she could believe it was true. *'Managed to get away. Put on something skimpy and be ready for fun. XXX'*

That made no sense. He knew she was wearing her nightie and... Maria was suddenly awake. As a message to her, it didn't make sense, but it did if her friends were right and Bill was cheating. Hoping there was an innocent explanation, she phoned him back.

Maria was so proud of Bill — he'd only been working at the firm for a short while and already he was considered an important asset. Surely everyone else was wrong about him?

house. Perhaps she'd instinctively headed to Dad for comfort?

Dad was already on the driveway when Maria pulled up. As soon as she opened the car door, Jock bounded out with a yelp of pleasure and rushed to greet him. After making a fuss of the dog, Dad said, "You caught me disposing of the evidence".

"Evidence?" For a second she thought he meant Bill's dismembered body but, of course, Dad didn't know anything about that yet and, in any case, he wasn't any more violent than Jock.

"Cherry had a really busy day and was shattered. I couldn't be bothered with cooking, so I ordered pizza."

Maria almost laughed. "Bill did the same, except of course he didn't pay for it."

"Ah. Did you argue about it?"

"No. I got a text he'd meant to send to another woman."

Dad hugged her. "Oh, love. I was so hoping I was wrong about him."

What had she been thinking? That life wasn't worth living just because some bloke had tricked her? Dad loved her. Her dog loved her. Her friends were still her friends. All, in different ways, had tried to warn her.

For now though, there was just Dad... and Cherry.

"How can we help, love?" Dad asked.

"I'd like a bed for the night and a glass of wine. Did you finish the bottle?"

"We did," said Cherry, who'd come out. "But I can easily open another, and the bed in your room is made."

Maria smiled at her stepmother. Maybe one day she'd find someone as right for her as Cherry was for Dad.

THE END

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Puzzles

Just for fun, make yourself a coffee and try our two festive brain-teasers!

ARROWWORD

Drastically	Shopping trip	Briefly summarise	Fall in a heap	Complete	Lock opener	Perform again
Rosy-faced (5-7)						
Large bright meteors	Furrow	Dove's sound		Learned person	Near	Huge mythical beings
					Marshy area	
Snooker-rod		If you don't mind!				Penniless
	Also, as well	German word for 'Mr'	Weight of 2240 pounds	Health hydro		
Tap gently	Enticement, seduction					
		Boy		Tiny mark		
Defeat or baffle	Map-reading runners					

Rearrange the letters in the shaded squares to spell out a figure made by children out of frozen water (7)

KRISS KROSS

Fit the words listed below into the grid, then rearrange the letters in the shaded squares to spell out the name of the man in red (5, 5)

3 letters

ELF
TOY
TUB

4 letters

GIFT
HOME
OVEN
TREE
WINE

5 letters

ANGEL
CHEER
CHILD
HOLLY
MUSIC
6 letters
PARCEL
SHERRY
SLEIGH

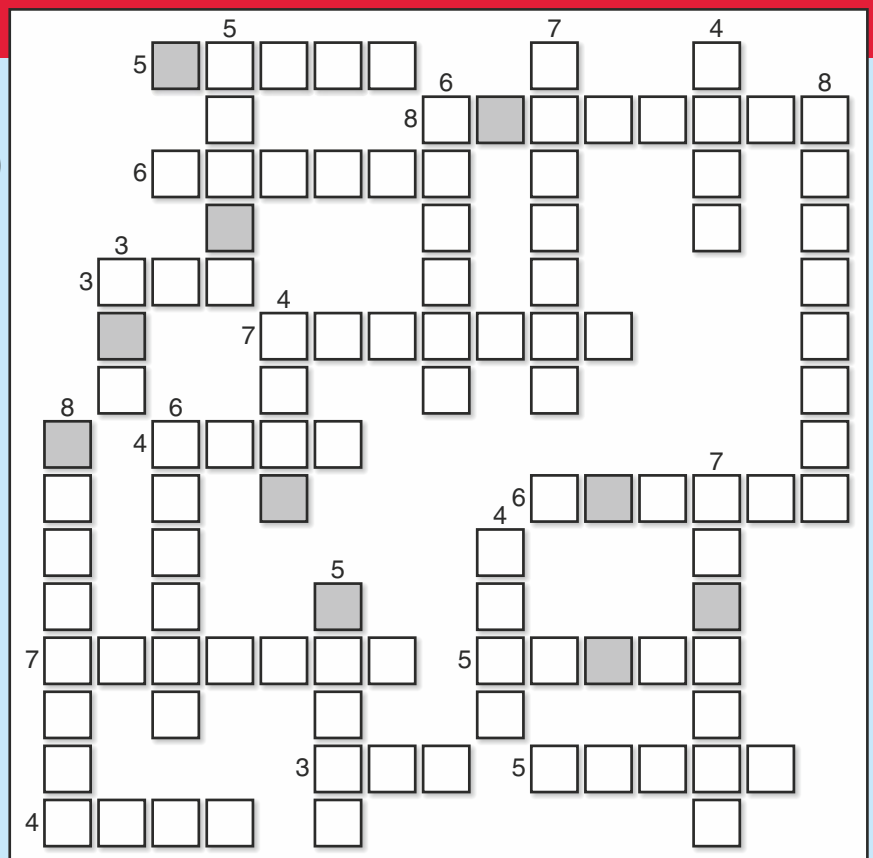
TURKEY

7 letters

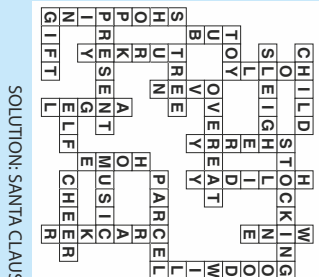
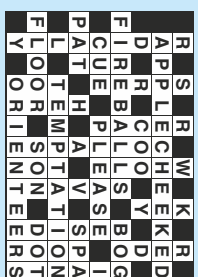
CRACKER
HOLIDAY
OVEREAT
PRESENT

8 letters

GOODWILL
SHOPPING
STOCKING



ANSWERS



SOLUTION: SANTA CLAUS

SOLUTION: SNOWMAN

Laura and Hilary both looked at the photo. Its odd shape was due to the fact that one of the people in it had been cut out, leaving a narrow gap between two others

Laura rang her friend Hilary. "What are you up to?" she said. "I'm having a clear-out," said Hilary.

This happened periodically: a cull of possessions, followed by a series of trips to charity shops and the refuse tip, all so that Hilary, who was an inveterate collector, a frequenter of antique fairs, car-boot sales and those same charity shops to which she donated, could start refilling the shelves and the cupboards so recently laid bare.

"You can give me a hand, if you like."

Laura, who was of a rather more minimalist persuasion, nevertheless agreed to do so. There was something quite cathartic in disposing of other people's clutter.

"Come round on Saturday," Hilary said, "by which time my back might have stopped aching. I think I ricked it when I was climbing into the loft. Either that, or it's just the good old arthritis baring its teeth."

The topic of arthritis featured more and more frequently as time went on and the pair of them approached what they facetiously referred to as their 'twilight years'.

"When does old age actually start? Officially, I mean?" Hilary had once asked, and Laura had said grimly, "When you start believing in it."

That hadn't yet happened but if and when it did, Laura consoled herself with remembering a poem learned at school: *Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be.*

Not that she was growing old along with anyone now, except perhaps Hilary, both having been widowed around the same time, and their children grown and scattered.

They'd been friends for years, comforted each other through the ups and downs of marriage and parenthood, offered consolation during the bad times and shared in the rejoicing when events exceeded expectation.

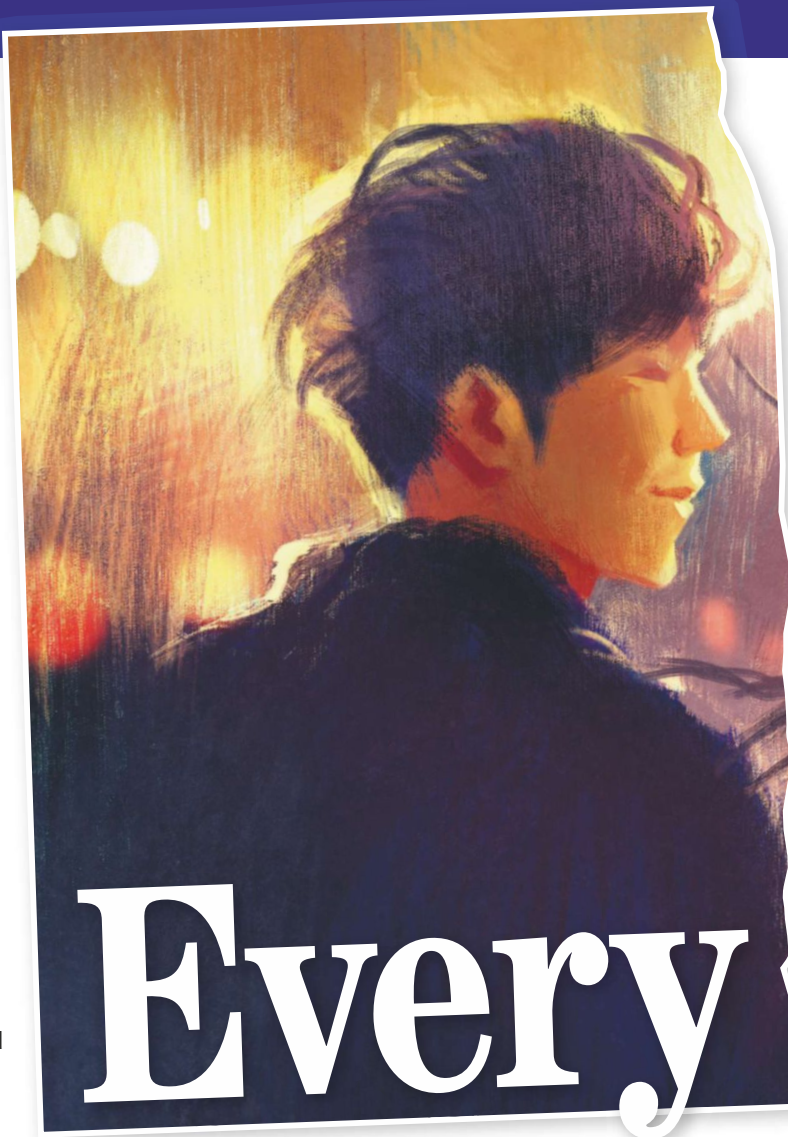
Age, they often thought, had at least conferred one most welcome benefit: when married to their respective husbands, both had experienced some lean years, but their husbands were now memorialised in marble in the cemetery and, though intermittently much missed, were responsible for the comfortable lifestyles enjoyed by their widows. In other words, both had been well-insured and proved to be worth more dead than alive.

So now Laura and Hilary were able to refurbish their homes without having to make compromises with regard to the taste of others.

Now they could afford exotic holidays, board cruise-liners, book weekly appointments to have their hair done and their

“*There'd been a few men on the scene since the demise of their husbands*”

nails painted. And when Laura reluctantly realised that her eyesight and reflexes were not what they once were, it was taxis rather than buses to which she



Every Tells A

had recourse in place of her own vehicle.

Their children, observing this luxury, referred to them as 'The Merry Widows' but, though they weren't particularly merry, they were far from being miserable.

"I thought we'd have some lunch," Hilary said on the Saturday, "before we make a start on the spare room."

The spare room housed the erstwhile contents of the loft, as well as its own collection of discarded items. So, replete with ravioli and a couple of glasses of pinot grigio, they rolled up their sleeves and equipped themselves with a sufficiency of black plastic bags.

"What on earth are these?" Laura, delving into a cardboard box, had unearthed a sheaf of cardboard files, all spotted with mould, and several text books. She read aloud from the spine of one of them, *Statistical Analysis In Psychology*. Gosh, that sounds heavy going. When and why did you acquire that?"

Hilary looked up from riffling through some old birthday cards. "It was when I was doing that Open University course," she said. "I didn't get very far with it, I'm afraid."

"Oh," said Laura, "how come?"

"It was too difficult," Hilary admitted. "And then Leslie came on the scene."

There'd been a few men on



Picture A Story

the scene since the demise of their husbands. Laura tried to place Leslie. "Was he the one with the moustache who never stopped talking?"

"No," said Hilary, "that was Alan. Leslie was the bank manager with the villa in Spain."

"Oh yes," said Laura, "I remember. Could bore for England."

"Could bore for Spain," said Hilary, "if not the entire continent of Europe."

They were quiet for a while, musing upon their forays into the mature dating game, all of which had come to nothing. There were still one or two presentable gents of their acquaintance who could be

relied upon for escort duties or help with moving heavy furniture, but the idea of setting up home again with any member of the male species no longer appealed. As Hilary put it, "It would be good to have someone to push one's wheelchair, should the day ever dawn but, on the other hand, one might be the wheelchair-pusher so, on balance, I think I prefer to remain a *femme sole*."

"Is that the right phrase," Laura said, "or a dish on a French menu?"

They worked systematically all afternoon, emptying boxes and sorting items into the various

heaps intended for their different destinations. Newer acquisitions rested cheek by jowl with the detritus of long years of accumulation: electric plugs minus pins, odd lengths of cable, blunt chisels, a shaftless screwdriver, old books, their pages foxed almost beyond legibility, unravelled cassette tapes, brooches missing their clasps, packets containing seeds that would never germinate and wedding invitations to marriages that had long since ended in divorce.

At six o'clock, they carried what had been sorted to the garage where it would await collection by a man with a van, and Hilary ordered a takeaway from the local Chinese restaurant.

"You don't have to get back for anything, do you?" she asked Laura. "Because there's still that bag of photographs to sort through."

Laura shook her head. Anticipating this eventuality, she'd recorded the television programme that she'd intended to watch that evening.

They ate their king prawn with cashew nuts and polished off the remains of the bottle of wine and then Hilary brought in the bag that contained photographs, some of them in their original folders, some loose, and tipped the contents on to the dining table.

"Why don't people write names and dates on the back?" she said. "Who are these people?"

There were Victorian matrons in bustles and bonnets, elderly gentlemen with fiercely waxed moustaches. There were boys in sailor suits and flappers with kiss-curls peeping from beneath their cloche hats. There were young men standing to attention in uniforms and women with Marcel waves, groups wearing paper hats or waving flags, youngsters peddling their tricycles or paddling in the

waves at the edge of the sea.

"I suppose I ought to keep some of these," Hilary said, "in case the kids ever want to investigate their ancestry. Thus far, they've shown no interest whatsoever. They might just as well have been foundlings left in the church porch. But," she continued, "there are loads of duplicates that can be chucked. You remember when Bob had his David Bailey phase? Snapping away at every opportunity? Could be quite annoying sometimes. Oh," she said, picking up a photograph, "whatever could have possessed me to wear that?"

“
It was a group
photograph,
a family
gathering,
perhaps

”

"Well," said Laura, "it's a sad fact, but safari suits and Cuban heels were once all the rage."

They checked and chucked for an hour or so and then Laura said, "Oh-oh!" and Hilary looked up and Laura handed over a large, oddly-shaped black and white print.

Hilary stared at it and then, without shifting her gaze, said, "I didn't realise that I still had that," and handed it back.

It was a group photograph, a family gathering, perhaps, and its odd shape was due to the fact that one of its members had been cut out, leaving a narrow gap between two others.

Hilary was gazing thoughtfully into the middle distance. "Pretty irrational, wasn't it, cutting somebody out of a photograph? But I was feeling pretty irrational at the time."

"You cut him out of a photograph," Laura said. "It could have been worse."

"I know what I would have liked to do," Hilary said, "given half a chance."

Laura put the photograph

Every Picture Tells A Story

face down on the table. "You'd have had to wait until I'd had my turn," she said.

Taken just a few years earlier than the safari suit photograph was one showing Hilary at age 20: all mini skirt, panda eyes, white lipstick and Beatles haircut. She was looking straight at the camera, smiling widely, nose wrinkled, displaying a spattering of freckles across its bridge. She looked ready to embrace life, ripe for romance.

There wasn't yet an engagement ring upon her finger but by the time that the mutilated photograph was taken, that accoutrement had been acquired.

She'd met him, the fiancé, on a train while travelling back from college where she was studying to be a physiotherapist. He'd lifted her suitcase into the overhead rack. He'd smiled. She'd thought that he had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

"Is anyone sitting here?" she'd asked, indicating the vacant seat next to him.

"Only you," he'd replied, turning to look at her. Those eyes! That smile!

He was older than she, but she'd always been attracted to older men. By the time the train reached the terminus, they'd made each other's acquaintance. By the time they'd alighted from it, she was well on the way to being smitten beyond the point of no return.

His name was Duncan Blyth — she wrote it in her diary (coded, as always, to frustrate her mother's prying eyes) — and he travelled around the north of England, endeavouring to encourage the relevant businesses to invest in the electrical products manufactured by his firm. It was sheer chance that he'd been

travelling on a train that day, the reason being that his car was in dock. Not chance, Hilary thought, but fate.

The following week, he took her for a spin in that car: a dark blue, open-topped sports car with a white leather hood. She'd once seen a film in which Audrey Hepburn had been conveyed along the Amalfi coast

“*She lived and breathed Duncan Blyth, couldn't stop talking about him*”

in just such a vehicle. The Lancashire plain was somewhat different, but she felt that the comparison was not inaccurate. They sped along, the sun on her face, the wind in her hair (which, because it was cut so short, fortunately remained in place), feasting her eyes not on the landscape but instead upon his incomparable profile, thrillingly aware of the proximity of his corduroy-clad thigh next to her own.

After they'd been driving for a while, he turned into a quiet little country lane, stopped the car, placed a finger under her chin and turned her face towards his own and kissed her. She almost fainted with delight. "Has anyone ever told you," he said, leaning back and looking at her intently, "that you have the most perfectly heart-shaped face?"

Friends had always accused her of being soppy, but now she

became super-soppy. She lived and breathed Duncan Blyth, couldn't stop talking about him: his classical good looks, his wit, his intelligence, his *savoir-faire*. He took her for a meal to an Italian restaurant (she'd never previously been anywhere more sophisticated than a Berni Inn) and their eyes met over the candle in its straw-swathed chianti bottle and he told her that he'd never met a girl like her before. (She'd never met a man like him before; she'd only ever met boys whose gaucheness had become apparent when compared with his suavity.)

That night, they went back to his flat and that night they did the deed, as one of her coarser friends put it; she preferred the description that she'd once read in one of her soppiest books: she had given herself to him. And, having done so, the natural progression — at least in those days — was to

expect the bestowal of an engagement ring.

Her parents, when eventually told about him, had not been keen: a commercial traveller! But he soon charmed them too, and had them eating out of his hand. It was only her grandmother, perhaps well-versed on the subject of men and their wives, who sounded a dissenting note, "He's soon got his feet under the table," she remarked.

Hilary ignored such cynicism. She loved Duncan and he loved her. He'd told her so, many times. And though perhaps the engagement had been more her idea than his and its implementation largely at her instigation, she had no reason to doubt that he wasn't equally enthusiastic.

Of course, due to the nature of his work they couldn't spend as much time together as she would have wished. His was a peripatetic existence, his days spent driving between appointments, his nights in hotels. Though the enforced separation made their reunions all the more exciting.

A small party was arranged to celebrate their engagement. Hilary plundered her grant and bought herself a Mary Quant outfit for the occasion. She was ready far too early, admiring



herself and her ring in the mirror. ("You'd need a magnifying glass to see that stone," her grandmother had said. "It's the thought that counts," Hilary had replied haughtily, knowing that his salary wouldn't run to anything more resplendent — but he had prospects, he was working his way up the ladder; one day, he told her, she'd have a diamond as big as The Ritz.)

She was early but he was late. Very late. She was starting to panic when he finally appeared, full of apology, looking slightly dishevelled, mumbling something about the car failing to start. "Hurry up," she said. "Dad wants to take a photograph."

So he smoothed his hair and straightened his tie. But when the film was developed, you could see that his shirt collar was askew. She was going to ask her father to take another one, of just the two of them, to be put into a silver frame and displayed on the mantelpiece, but she never got the opportunity.

In those days, Laura lived a few miles away in a small village along the coast. She'd just started work as a clerical officer with the Inland Revenue. This entailed a tedious journey involving a long walk followed by two buses. The weather that

winter was dreary: day after day of relentless rain; she'd reach the office almost soaked, despite umbrella and waterproofs. And sometimes the buses weren't on time, resulting in a reproof from her rather unpleasant superior: "Not only do you look like a drowned rat, but you're ten minutes late into the bargain." She determined to save up for driving lessons and, after passing her test, persuading her father to provide the deposit for a car.

One particularly dank afternoon, she was waiting for the homeward-bound bus when a dark blue sports car drew up alongside and its driver leaned across and wound down the window and said, "You look as though you could use a lift."

Well, everyone knew about not accepting lifts from strange men, but she was drenched and feeling particularly glum because she'd been reprimanded that afternoon for an error that was actually attributable to someone else's ineptitude. And he was a very handsome man with an open, honest-seeming expression; she hesitated only momentarily before accepting the offer.

He drove her right to her door. She only hoped that her parents weren't watching. Though nothing untoward had occurred.

He'd simply conversed easily and politely. "I'm often driving in this direction," he'd said, "so if you ever need another lift..."

A week passed before she saw him again. This time, it wasn't raining but she was tired and accepted anyway. He was attractive, he was good company and he treated her

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She'd never
had a boyfriend.
A proper
exclusive
boyfriend

with respect. Though when she entered the house and her mother asked who had given her the lift she said, "Oh, just a work colleague."

On the third occasion that he stopped to pick her up, he said, "If we're to carry on meeting like this, I think we should introduce ourselves. My name's Duncan. What's yours?"

She'd never had a boyfriend, a proper, exclusive boyfriend. She was pretty enough, and personable, but her location was the problem: a small village off the beaten track meant that boys of her own age, car-less, were, by and large, unable or unwilling to beat a path to her door. Plus, in her view, her parents were hugely over-protective. When Duncan invited her to the pictures, she pretended that she was going there with a girl from work who had a car and would bring her home afterwards. Therefore she had to tell Duncan to drop her off at the end of the lane in case her parents should be twitching the lace curtains.

The film that they saw was *Far From The Madding Crowd*. It had been a choice between that and *Alfie*. He'd deferred to her preference; *Alfie*, she'd heard, was a bit near the knuckle as well as portraying the exploits of the worst sort of womaniser.

Before she prepared to alight

at the end of the lane, Duncan had turned to her and said, "May I kiss you?"

"Be careful," her mother had warned, "there are boys who will take advantage of you." But Duncan wasn't a boy and this wasn't taking advantage, this was a request, and what could she do but accede, because she wanted to accede, wanted to experience being kissed with such intensity that her limbs trembled and her insides dissolved?

"I can't keep dropping you off at the end of the road," he said after there'd been a few more evenings at the cinema, curtailed so that they could repair to his flat and follow up with what had been foreshadowed by the kissing. She took it that he wished to regularise their association so, with much trepidation, she introduced him to her parents. "Bit old for you, isn't he?" her father said, after tea had been taken, together with a plate of French Fancies. "Seems a decent bloke, though."

"Lovely manners," added her mother.

Laura was a sensible girl, not one to consider the world altogether well lost for love. Duncan's attentions might make her go weak at the knees, but that didn't make her lose sight of the fact that he was also a good catch: urbane, pleasing on the eye, and with excellent prospects. Laura was not enamoured with either life in the sticks or a career in the Inland Revenue; she fantasised about a nice modern house in town, two children, one blonde, one dark: Nicola and Robin. She fantasised about wedding dresses and orange blossom and organ music. A few months later, having, at first nervously and then enthusiastically, acceded to his more advanced amorous advances, she began to plot the route of their drives to take in the nearest town where she would encourage him to park close to a jeweller's shop of her acquaintance.

"I want to be with you always," she said wistfully.

"Well, you know that I have to be away a lot," he said. "It's the nature of my job."



Every Picture Tells A Story

"I know that," she said. "Just as long as you always come home to me."

There was a tray of engagement rings displayed very prominently at the front of the jeweller's window. She looked at it and then up at Duncan. He looked down, pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Has anyone ever told you," he said, "that you have the most perfectly heart-shaped face?"

"So these are to be kept," Laura said, indicating one of the two piles of photographs, "and these disposed of?"

"Correct," said Hilary.

"And what about this one?"

She extended a fastidious forefinger towards the defaced specimen that still lay between them on the dining table.

Instead of answering her question, Hilary said, "You know, I can't believe how much I hated you back then."

"Ditto," said Laura.

"But not as much as we both hated — what was her name?" said Hilary.

Laura's brow was corrugated with the effort of recollection. "Myra? Moira? Darned if I can remember."

They pondered the notion that something that had affected them both so profoundly could have faded from their memories.

"What did you do with your engagement ring?" Hilary asked eventually. "I threw mine in the canal."

"How profligate," said Laura. "I got the money back on mine. It wasn't much, but I put it towards a car."

Ever the practical one, thought Hilary. Then she said, as she'd said a hundred times before years ago, "What do you think would have happened if

— Myra, Moira — Mona, that was her name — hadn't got pregnant and we hadn't found out about it? How would he have managed to wriggle out of the situation? Would he have dumped us, committed bigamy, headed for the hills? It still amazes me that he could keep the plates spinning like that: dashing between the two of us while still somehow fitting her in as well. What if it had been you or I who became pregnant?"

"Perish the thought," said Laura. "We both dodged a bullet there."

"I was surprised," Hilary continued, "that he actually did the decent thing and married Mona."

"Only because her father practically went after him with a shotgun, so I was told," said Laura.

"You have to admit he was charming though, wasn't he?" said Hilary, her face softening. "When you were with him, he made you feel like a million dollars."

"The problem was, he made everyone feel that way," said Laura. "And they have to be charming, philanderers, else how would they succeed? What is strange is that we each considered the other to be the villain of the piece rather than blaming the real culprit, him."

They'd met, she and Hilary, when all was revealed, when Mona's mother had discovered his duplicity or, to be accurate, triplicity, done some detective work and contacted Hilary's mother who, in turn, had made her own mother aware of the situation.

They'd met in Hilary's parents' house, all three of the betrayed plus their mothers, fathers and Hilary's grandmother, who sat in the corner, saying repeatedly, "I always thought

that he looked rather shifty."

All three had wanted to kill the other but, in the case of Laura and Hilary, loathing had subsided remarkably quickly when they realised that they had more in common than a relationship with a love rat and, actually, seemed to quite like each other.

They'd met after that to commiserate but eventually,

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Hilary was acquainted with the concept of coincidence

when their tears had dried, decided that they might possibly remain friends.

"And look at us now," said Hilary, consigning the photograph to the flames of the wood-burner and opening another bottle of pinot grigio.

Hilary was acquainted with the concept of coincidence but when, a couple of weeks after the discovery of the Duncan-less photograph, she went to visit her friend Dorothy in a care home and encountered the missing subject of that recorded image, she was certain that something more than random concurrence was involved.

Not chance, but fate, as she'd believed all those years ago when taking a seat in a railway carriage next to a handsome stranger.

She rang Laura as soon as she got home, before she'd even

taken off her coat. "You'll never guess —"

"Give me a clue," said Laura.

"Dorothy was in the lounge when I arrived," said Hilary, "so they brought us tea in there and while we were drinking it, one of the assistants wheeled in this old fellow and plonked his chair between two others, which were occupied by a couple of equally aged ladies. I heard the girl say, 'Now behave yourself, Duncan Blyth. I don't want to hear any complaints from these ladies.' Well, I nearly shot out of my seat, as you can imagine.

Dorothy said, 'What's up? You look like you've seen a ghost.' 'Of sorts,' I said, 'of sorts.' From where I was sitting, I could only see his back view, so after a bit I got up and walked across the room, as though I was intending to look through the window —"

"And?" said Laura impatiently.

"It was him. He looked about a thousand years old, but you could still discern his original features."

"He didn't recognise you?" said Laura.

Hilary shook her head. "He was just sitting there, smiling vaguely, with a tartan rug over his knees. Either his eyesight had deteriorated — (Cataracts, she'd wondered, clouding those now faded blue eyes?) — "Or else he was away with the fairies."

Or, Laura thought, your appearance has altered just as much as his.

"I'd never imagined him making old bones," Hilary said. "Thought he'd have worn himself out long ago. As I was watching," she continued, "he turned to one of the old dears in the adjacent wheelchair and started stroking her hand and looking at her with that exact same, ever-so-sincere expression that I remember. He was saying something to her but I didn't catch what it was."

"Probably asking if anyone had ever told her that she had a perfectly heart-shaped face," said Laura.

And then, simultaneously, they began to laugh, and both said, almost in unison, "Some things just never change."

THE END

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Just Jane

As a general rule, I don't use the C word pre-December. It is bad enough seeing tinsel in the shops the moment the bikinis have been taken down, without having to contemplate the relatives crammed around a carcass, cheating at Trivial Pursuit.

This does not stop my son talking Christmas in August, just to see me wince, or my mother trying to slide it into conversation in July. Now the online supermarkets are at it too. As October dawns, there they are — ping! — with daily emails begging me beat the rush, think festive menus and book my delivery slot NOW.

My delete finger is hovering over the latest missive when I recall the episode of *The Good Life* in which Margot's entire Christmas fails to arrive. For Penelope Keith's upper-crust lady who lunched, it was social disaster. But I can see the appeal. One of my top Christmases ever was the one that was cancelled. Bad weather on Christmas Eve closed the airports and scuppered our plans to jet off to warmer climes. Having already completed the family visits, dispatched presents and seen friends, there was nothing to do on the big day except shove the last-minute, lone-remaining, cut-price turkey in the oven, cook veg for three, and open a bottle of Champagne. Leaving me to go to the pub, read my book and watch *Downton Abbey* all the way through without anyone screaming. It was bliss. I have since considered simply pretending to go away and then lying on the floor with the lights off for three days, in an effort to repeat it. The shopping not turning up could be the next best thing.

Jane fantasises about Christmas with a difference...

"So what are we doing?" asks my son as I sit at the computer trying to be enthused by a three-for-two on brandy butter.

"Same as usual, I suppose," I say vaguely, as I click on a second bottle of sherry, remembering the soothing effect it had last year on the more querulous members of the party.

"So Dad gets grumpy, Grandma comes round and you burn the sausage rolls," he says, looking over my shoulder. "Can you order lots of beer?"

It is an old Christmas adage that a watched pastry roll remains pale and flaccid

— “ —
Some traditions can't be broken and the smell of smoke is one of them

indefinitely. Turn away for a moment to refill a glass and it chars to a cinder. I press the button on the party-sized packs, twice.

Used to a diet of denial 'til the last possible minute, I struggle to envisage how many potatoes we'll need. Or make any sort of



choice. There are bronzed turkeys and boned turkeys and turkeys fed on organic corn plucked from the sheaves by handmaidens. There are crowns and legs and bacon-breasted birds that have been stuffed with fruits and herbs I've never heard of, and a massive creation that is four different creatures stuffed into each other.

"Shall we have guinea fowl?" I enquire. "Inside a duck within a goose?"

My son looks at me in pity. "You won't be able to cook that," he says.

Ignoring this lack of faith in my culinary prowess, I order carrots and cauliflower and mince pies, quite a lot of wine and several kilos of crisps, pausing to wrinkle my nose at the photos of knobbly greens. Christmas is the only time I allow

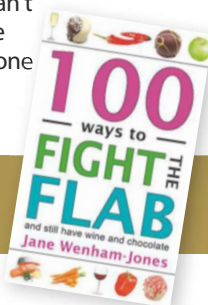
a sprout across the threshold and I am always grateful — if faintly queasy — when my sister removes the leftovers to eat cold on Boxing Day with mayonnaise. (Yes, she does, really!)

"Chestnuts," says my husband, once he's double-checked the sprout order. "Cranberry jelly," he adds, because we get a jar every year and nobody eats it.

"Chocolates," I add silently. "And brandy. And gin."

The full seasonal feast will be delivered 48 hours before the big day and I am still harbouring a small fantasy of the whole lot going astray. To this end, I have stashed a bottle of fizz and got some sausage rolls in early. Some traditions can't be broken and the smell of smoke is one of them. Happy Christmas!

100 Ways To Fight The Flab And Still Have Wine And Chocolate by Jane Wenham-Jones is published by Accent Press. Out in paperback and e formats.



C lick, click, click go the needles. The odd glass chinks. The occasional comment is made.

Every now and then, an exasperated sigh rises up.

This is knitting club. Every Thursday night in the snug of The Flying Horse. Everyone gathers here at eight o'clock precisely, for an hour and a half of knitting and... well, mainly just knitting really. It's not exactly bitch and stitch around here and people really do seem to want to concentrate on their knitting. Which came as a bit of a shock to me, at first. The most animated I've seen them is when someone comes in with a new and challenging pattern, or a secret source of unusual wool.

But I've got used to it, and now I quite like the peace and quiet. There's actually something quite Zen about it. And there's something intriguing about getting to know people in this weirdly limited way. It's funny how you can know one aspect of someone's life so well, whilst knowing nothing else about them at all.

Take Emily. I know she only likes knitting with the finest, softest baby wool. She revels in the pastel colours and the gentle fluffiness of it.

"Anything else feels funny in my fingers," she says.

And as for Juliet... well, I know she likes chunky yarn and clunky needles. "Knits up quicker," she says. And she's right. She seems to be able to produce big, sloppy sweaters and long, winding scarves on an almost industrial scale.

And I know exactly how she likes her gin and tonic. "Ice and a slice. Lime not lemon."

Then there's Malcolm. He knits the most incredible Fair Isle and other complicated stuff. It's not surprising he doesn't say much, to be honest. Just looking at the number of different strands of wool he has makes my head hurt.

So I know these little

What Happens In Knitting

Katie is changing the group. She's working on it like a piece of grit in an oyster, but is she going to produce a pearl of great perfection, or just a gritty oyster that no-one wants to eat?

snippets about them, but I am left with some big questions.

Where are all those baby garments that Emily knits destined for? She only ever makes the smallest sizes, so it doesn't seem like she's knitting

That's why it feels a bit disruptive when Katie turns up for the first time. Unlike everyone else, she doesn't seem to want to just talk about the knitting. She wants people to spill all the details of their lives

happens in knitting club, stays in knitting club', right?"

This kind of gentle digging goes on for a couple of weeks. Katie is changing the group. She's working on it like a piece of grit in an oyster. But is she going to produce a pearl of great perfection, or just a gritty oyster that no-one wants to eat?

Things come to a head on the Thursday that marks a month on from Katie joining the group. It's one of those evenings when there's a closeness in the air that either spells trouble or a thunderstorm. Sometimes both.

It's Emily I notice first. She is on edge. Well, even more on edge than usual. I cringe as Katie starts to interrogate her.

"What's wrong, Emily?" she says. "You don't seem very cheerful tonight."

Emily's face crumples. "I've been at the hospital today," she says.

"Oh, Emily," says Juliet. "I didn't know you were ill."

"I'm not. I go there every week to drop off the baby clothes."

Ah, the baby clothes.

"For the prem unit," she carries on. "Quite often the mothers aren't prepared and they haven't got the clothes

“She wants people to spill all the details of their lives as they stitch”

for a growing child of her own.

And why does Juliet need to knit quite so many scarves? Does absolutely everyone she knows get a scarf for Christmas? Does she, perhaps, barter them for bottles of gin?

Does Malcolm knit that beautiful Fair Isle for himself? I've only ever seen him in beige slacks and a sweater that looks like it came from a supermarket's value range.

What goes on in all their lives when they leave here? Who knows? They all just knit while they're here. Calmly. Serenely. Quietly.

as they stitch.

"I just want to know a bit more about you all," she says, as she beams around the group, her eyes searching each member out like headlights on an old Morris Minor.

Everyone looks a bit uncomfortable.

"Well, we don't normally talk about that sort of thing," Emily says.

"Why not?" Katie trains her headlights on Emily.

"It's private, I suppose," Malcolm mutters, dropping a stitch in his agitation.

"That doesn't matter," Katie says. "It's just between us. 'What

What happens in the Knitting Club

ready, or they haven't got the right sizes. That's where I come in." And suddenly it all makes sense.

"What happened today to make you sad?" Malcolm asks.

"I never actually see the babies, of course," Emily starts. "They're too fragile to just let anyone in there. But I like to hear the stories, and sometimes I get to see photos afterwards of them wearing something I've knitted. It's lovely. Anyway, a baby was born last week. He was so very tiny. And when I asked about him today, they said he'd died. I'm afraid I made rather a fool of myself by blubbing all over them. And now I'm so sad, I don't know if I can carry on doing it any more. I don't know how I'll cope if it happens again."

It's the longest speech I've ever heard Emily make. I know it must have cost her. But perhaps getting her feelings out there will help as well.

"You must keep going," Juliet says. "Look at how much good you're doing with your knitting. My stuff ends up just sitting in the cupboard at home. I don't seem to have as many friends to give gifts to as I used to have."

Her eyes cloud over for a moment, then she makes a visible effort to pull herself together. "Why don't you show me how to make the little baby jackets and booties, and I'll

come to the hospital with you next week?" she says to Emily.

Emily glows at that. "Oh, would you? Yes, I think I'd feel braver if I wasn't on my own."

"And I will feel my knitting has a purpose and it won't be just hanging around at home."

"Actually, if you don't mind me mentioning it," says Emily, looking braver by the minute, "those scarves you knit. If you joined them up in rows, they'd make great blankets. Loads of charities are always on the lookout for knitted blankets for refugees and elderly or

homeless people. I'll help you, if you like."

Then the two of them smile triumphantly at each other. A breakthrough has been made.

Malcolm may have thought he was going to get away with it. But, no. Katie turns to him with a determined expression and asks, "So, what do you do with all those wonderful Fair Isle sweaters?"

"I sell them," he says, looking rather sheepish.

"That's brilliant," Katie says.

He shrugs. "I don't have much money these days and I'm a full-time carer for my wife. She's crippled with arthritis and can't do much for herself. Thursday evening someone comes to sit with her for two hours so I can come here, but apart from that I don't really get out. Selling the jumpers brings in enough money on top of our pensions that I can keep the house comfortable, have the heating on when we need it without

worrying, and buy her audio books and DVDs so she doesn't get too bored."

"I know," says Katie, "why don't I sit with your wife sometimes, so you can get out a bit more? I'm — I'm sure she's about to say lonely, but she bites it back — "At a bit of a loose end sometimes."

But of course, lonely is exactly what she is. Why didn't I realise it before? Malcolm looks thrilled at the offer. "I'm sure my wife would love that. And actually

there are a few other things I'd like to do if I could get away from home for a bit longer. Maybe even go to some craft fairs, if I can."

He beams in a most uncharacteristic way, and goes back to his knitting with renewed vigour.

So Malcolm has solved Katie's loneliness problem, and Katie has solved Malcolm's problem.

And it sounds like Juliet might be able to go some way to helping solve Emily's problem.

And Juliet's problem? Well, I think that's one for me. Juliet gets up and shuffles towards the bar for a top-up.

"Do you think you might have had enough?" I ask her ever so gently and softly, not wanting anyone else to hear.

She gives me a look. "How did you know?"

"Just a little idea I had," I say. "You drink like someone who's trying to drown the pain."

"Do I?" she sniffs back tears.

"You could be right. I don't think my drinking actually caused my marriage breakdown, but I don't suppose it helped. And it probably isn't that surprising that none of my friends want to spend time with me any more. You're right. I need to stop."

"It won't be easy. But it might be better now you have a bit more purpose in life." I nod towards Emily, who is knitting away happily.

"Yes, I hope so," says Juliet. "Maybe I'll just have a soft drink for now."

"Right you are," I say.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" she asks.

"No, of course I won't."

"Thank you," she says as she returns to her seat with a glass of orange juice.

A bubble of conversation floats up as they all chat much more freely than usual.

Juliet's secret is safe with me. What happens in knitting club, stays in knitting club.

I turn around behind the bar and go back to polishing glasses. Knitting club carries on around me. Without me. After all, I'm only the landlord. I'm not really part of the group at all. Although sometimes, I can't help wishing...

THE END

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“A bubble of conversation floats up as they all chat much more freely”

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The Makeover

She had been searching for a new job for five months now. It was not going well, and she feared there might be some difficulty with next month's rent on the bedsitting room she occupied in her friend's house...

What they want," said Miss Tilney, "is youth, and I lack it. I'm not sure I ever had it — not the kind of youth they seem to want, anyway."

Her friend Mrs Nash nodded and stirred the chicken stew. She feared it was sticking.

"Shall I lay for us both?" said Miss Tilney, rising from the uncomfortable yellow chair she always chose when Eleanor invited her to share her supper. "I was never perky," she said, as the stew was served (it *had* stuck a little) "or up-to-date."

Eleanor Nash stole a quick glance at her friend's profile: the large, pinkish nose; the scraped-back grey hair, held in place with pins; the watery blue eyes.

"Perky isn't everything, Diana," she said.

"Well, it can't be my references," said Miss Tilney, "because they are excellent."

Indeed they were. Miss Tilney had been a brilliant librarian and she had letters to prove it: *'Mary just loved The Little White Horse. It is now her favourite book; 'Thanks to you, Francis is reading every night before he goes to sleep; 'Miss Tilney was a vital and much-loved part of our team'.*

There was quite a collection of them, gathered over the years. In recent weeks, Miss Tilney had started taking the letters out of their plastic sleeves and re-reading them last thing

at night. They gave her courage.

She had been searching for a new job for five months now. It was not going well. Last night, not even reading the letters had prevented her lying awake, worrying. She feared there might be some difficulty with next month's rent on the bedsitting room she occupied in her friend's house. Of course, Eleanor was too kind to make a fuss, but it would be quite hard to bear, particularly in view of all her other kindnesses.

Miss Tilney had left work to nurse her mother through her final illness, 19 years ago. Her mother's death came later than expected and the house went on the debts. If it had not been for Eleanor offering her a room at such a reasonable rate, Miss Tilney did not know what she would have done. Her hand trembled a little as she raised the fork to her mouth. "This is just delicious," she said.

It had taken her a while to realise that the world of work no longer wanted her. She had felt quite jaunty walking to her first interview, even though, in her absence, the libraries had been rehoused in bright glass structures with beanbags and coffee machines and an air of energy that made her feel tired.

No, she had not worked for some time, she said. No, she did not have computer skills. "But I am sure I can learn," Miss Tilney

added desperately, at the fourth interview. Her questioners, who appeared very young, almost like children, in fact, said that of course there were re-skilling programmes available, but they said it doubtfully, with an air of having already lost interest in Miss Tilney and her references.

She shed a few tears in the privacy of her room and then gave herself a talking to: "Diana," she said, "you were not brought up to buckle at the first hurdle."

She lowered her sights a little

— “ —
She allowed herself a little daydream about treating Eleanor to a short break

and applied first for jobs as a personal assistant, where she thought her organisational skills might be appreciated, and then as receptionist. She had been quite hopeful of the last interview. The job seemed to consist of little more than answering the phone and showing people through to the office. She allowed herself a little daydream about treating Eleanor to a short break away.

But the look on the receptionist's face when Miss Tilney calmly said she was there for the interview was her first inkling that maybe she was being optimistic. The receptionist was a very pretty girl and Miss Tilney admired her red dress very much, though she thought it might leave her a little cold about the knees. 'She thinks I am too old!' she realised. 'What nonsense! Why, my brain is quite as sharp as ever it was!' She felt almost angry at the notion.

The girl's reaction put her off her stride and she was flustered in her answers. The young man behind the desk kept looking through his papers for something. She was suddenly afraid it might be her date of birth. "We will let you know, Miss Tilney," he said, opening the door for her. Miss Tilney tried to compose her lips into a bright smile. Her back was very straight as she walked out of the office.

Eleanor Nash, noticing the pinkish tinge to Miss Tilney's eyes that evening, made up her mind to cook roast lamb and never mind the expense.

Two weeks passed. Miss Tilney felt unwell. Eleanor was concerned. Diana was never ill. She set about persuading her to confide. "It's not as if I can actually do anything about my age, Eleanor," Miss Tilney said.

r



"Of course, they don't actually say I'm too old, they just think it. What am I to do?"

The answer came from the pages of a glossy magazine as she was waiting for a filling she had been putting off for months. She asked the dentist's receptionist ('So young, Eleanor, almost an infant!'), if she could keep the article.

"A makeover," she said, waving the page at her friend triumphantly, "I can't think why I didn't think of it before. Just look at these pictures." She pointed to the before and

after shots. "She looks 30 years younger!"

"It might just be the photo."

"Nonsense," said Miss Tilney, who felt dizzy with hopefulness. "It is terribly expensive, but just think, it will knock years off me."

Mrs Nash glanced again at her friend's face. It was a good face. Miss Tilney's character was written strongly in it: the bravery; sense of duty; the kindness. But it was difficult to imagine it ever looking young.

Miss Tilney was assured that the company was very exclusive. It was usually necessary to book weeks ahead. They had been rushed off their feet in the weeks following the article. But Miss Tilney was fortunate: a very famous actress (the receptionist whispered a name) had just cancelled and they would be able to squeeze her in.

Miss Tilney recklessly raided the little nest-egg she kept in a Post Office account.

The premises were glorious. Miss Tilney felt obliged to speak in a hushed voice. "Do you think you can do anything with me?"

she asked. "It is most important."

The receptionist was reassuring. "They are absolutely marvellous," she said, "you will not recognise yourself when they've finished." She herself was very beautiful. Miss Tilney took comfort from the splendour of the surroundings and her beauty. It would be worth the huge amount of money they were asking. She was led into the salon.

Her transformation took the entire day. She was astounded at quite how much needed to be done to her. The hairdresser, Mr Luigi, unpinned her hair and tutted at its colour and length. The beautician, a charming girl who quite terrified Miss Tilney, asked her about her 'routine'. Miss Tilney did not immediately understand and wondered, for a second, if she was being asked about her bowel movements. A moment's reflection clarified the matter. She answered that she used soap to wash her face each morning and cold cream in the evenings. "Ah," said the beautician. Miss Tilney read into that "Ah" a damning verdict. The stylist ordered her to stand while coloured scarves were held against her skin and then asked her to strip down to her undies so that her body-shape could be assessed. Miss Tilney was relieved she had decided to wear her winter vest.

The magnificence of the surroundings, the rich drapes of the curtains, the plush little sofas, the frequent offers of cups of coffee and the elegance of the chocolate twirls on the saucers all began to have their effect on Miss Tilney. She was impressed by the air of intense seriousness and concentration of all those around her. It reminded her a little of the deep, magical hush of her old library. As the day wore on, Miss Tilney found herself relaxing and even began to enjoy herself. She took an interest in the clothes, and expressed a cautious opinion or two. She even dared to declare that she never wore green. The shyness she had felt on arriving began to ease. 'How frivolous and how lovely,' she thought as she twirled in one of the dresses.

The Makeover

By 4.30pm, when a glass of Champagne was thrust into her hand, she was quite giddy. Her creators stepped back, like artists reviewing a masterpiece. The old Miss Tilney held her breath, the cloth was plucked from the mirror. The new Miss Tilney was revealed.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

They assured her they were.

"But do I look young?" she said doubtfully, looking again at the image in the mirror.

They assured her that she looked as young as it was possible for her to look, and that nobody could possibly have made her look any younger.

Miss Tilney travelled home on the Tube. She received many glances. She tried to tell herself they were admiring. "Oh, Eleanor!" she cried when she saw the expression on Mrs Nash's face. "I am such an old fool." She rushed up to her room and stripped out of the garish jacket and matching skirt. She scrubbed the make-up off her face. There was nothing she could do about the dyed brown hair or the ridiculous cut. She stared at herself in her mirror. "You are old, Diana," she told herself, "you are a haggard old woman and you have spent your savings on an act of folly."

Mrs Nash cooked salmon that evening, Miss Tilney's favourite.

Miss Tilney was tempted to cancel the next interview, but Eleanor wouldn't hear of it. "It really doesn't look so bad," she said of the hair, "and the colour does suit you really."

"Does it?" said Miss Tilney.

"Well, it will do when it has faded just a little," said Eleanor, "and you look lovely in my skirt and blouse." She had raided her own wardrobe.

"Oh, Eleanor, I told them I was 46," said Miss Tilney, "it seemed such a little lie, and I thought the makeover —" She paused.

"You can tell them it was a typing error."

In her nervousness, Miss Tilney misjudged the time. She stepped into a little café to wait. It was crowded. Miss Tilney had to share a table with an elderly man, who smiled briefly at her, indicated the empty chair and then raised his newspaper again.

She felt a little breathless. A cup of tea would soon sort her out, but the café really was very crowded, and a little hot and...

"Oh no, I'm so sorry! So sorry!" The waitress had a foreign accent. The spilt tea was scalding. A brown stain spread across Miss Tilney's blouse, a little tea pooled in her lap. The girl was really very young. A stern-looking proprietor hovered in the background.

"I'm so sorry, please let me clean — yes?" The poor girl was looking frightened.

Miss Tilney rose to the occasion. "It's absolutely nothing

— “ —
Now, for the first time, Miss Tilney felt despair and it felt like death

to worry about, my dear," she said. "It's really of no great importance. Look!" She dabbed away ineffectually at the stain with a serviette. "It's almost all gone now. Really, there is no need to upset yourself."

When the girl had gone to fetch another pot of tea, Miss Tilney's courage left her. To her horror, she felt the sting of tears.

"That was nice of you," said the man opposite. He had lowered his paper and was looking shrewdly at Miss Tilney. "That really was quite clumsy of her — and it has ruined your

blouse. May I?" He handed her a handkerchief.

"She's young and frightened," said Miss Tilney, working a little more at her blouse. "How terrible it would be not to forgive her. I was really a little afraid that her employer might be rather harsh to her."

"I meant it for your..."

He pointed to her eyes.

"Oh dear," said Miss Tilney, blushing. "You must think me such a fool to be upset over such a small thing."

"Not at all," said the man.

"It's just that I have an interview," she said. "I wanted to make a good impression."

He smiled. It was a nice smile, thought Miss Tilney.

"I'm sure you will," he said.

The interview went as badly as Miss Tilney had feared. She was terribly conscious of the stain on her top and the lie in her CV.

The interview was short, the young man brusque. She did not have the right qualifications. Miss Tilney managed a little smile. "Of course, of course, I see," she murmured.

The expression on her face struck him. "I am sure you will find a role that suits your talents better," he said hastily and not unkindly. "Do you need to sit down again?" he added, for Miss Tilney had turned very pale. Through all the disappointments in her life (which had lasted for considerably more than 46 years), her valiant spirit had remained hopeful. Now, for the first time, Miss Tilney felt despair and it felt like death. The room began to quiver.

"Jack, I need —"

Miss Tilney heard the office door open, and then she fainted.

"I think she's coming round," said



a girl's voice. She was raised into a seated position and a glass of water pressed into her hand.

"She's still very pale,"

a man said.

Miss Tilney opened her eyes. She was on a sofa. The young man had gone, and in his place was the man from the café.

"Tea, lots of sugar," he said.

Miss Tilney struggled up.

"You're ill," he said. "Bring some biscuits too," he added.

"I must —" said Miss Tilney.

"You must stay here until you feel better," said the man. He smiled. A most appealing smile, thought Miss Tilney. "And you must tell me what exactly my nephew, Jack, said that made you feel so unwell."

"Oh, Eleanor," said Miss Tilney, a week later. She held a letter between trembling fingers and began to weep. "They've offered me a job," said Miss Tilney. She passed the letter over.

Dear Miss Tilney, I am delighted to be able to offer you the position of... Apologies... my nephew did not fully understand... your experience, integrity and kindness are exactly what are needed for the role... Computer skills not required... Yours etc. and then handwritten at the bottom of the letter, under the signature: *We must, after all, forgive the young their mistakes.*

"Oh, Diana," said Mrs Nash joyfully, "Let's have salmon again for supper!"

THE END

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The Robin Family

More Tales From The Woodlands



The four little Robins had spent a busy but very enjoyable afternoon doing their Christmas shopping and then, after having had mince pies and mugs of hot blackberry cordial in the Swallow Tea Rooms, it was time to go home.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Rosemary, "I think we'd better hurry, because it's beginning to get quite dark."

"Cold too," Roley added, turning up his collar. "Do you think we're going to get some snow?" Richard and baby Rowena both chirruped together, "Oh, yes!"

By the time, the two little Robins had said goodbye to

Looking at the Stars

their cousins at The Old Well House and arrived at the gate of Tree Stump House, it was properly dark, and the sky was so full of twinkling stars, they had to stop to look at them.

"Aren't they beautiful?" said Rosemary. "There must be dozens and dozens of them!"

"More like thousands and thousands," Mr Robin told her. He had seen his son and daughter arrive and had come down to the gate to meet them. "And some of them have got names too."

"Has that one?" Roley asked, pointing to a star that was shining and sparkling far more brightly than any of the others.

"Yes, it certainly has," his father told him. "That's Sirius, the brightest star in the sky."

Soon, he was pointing out other stars that had been given names by long-ago astronomers, and it was so interesting that they forgot the time and were quite startled when Mrs Rebecca appeared, wondering where they were.

"We're looking at the stars," Rosemary explained, and after she had told her mother what Mr Robin had been saying, Mrs Rebecca was soon looking at the stars as well.

"Here Comes Father Christmas!"

There was great excitement among the youngest Woodlanders, for the afternoon had come when Father Christmas would arrive in The Woodlands to visit Anthea Rabbit's Flower Shop, riding on one of the deer who lived on the other side of the valley.

"He has agreed to help as Father Christmas' reindeer are resting before they draw his sleigh on Christmas Eve," Anthea explained to Rowena Robin and her friend, Jenny Wren.

So, that afternoon all the Woodlanders were waiting, eager to welcome Father Christmas, and then, on the stroke of three, a handsome stag, his antlers decorated with tinsel, appeared, carrying on his back a familiar figure with a white beard and in a scarlet gown and hood.

"Here comes Father Christmas!" chirruped Rowena Robin, hopping up and down.

"Hello, everyone!" Father Christmas called.

"Hello, Father Christmas!" the Woodlanders called back. Then, in the Flower Shop's

magical grotto, Father Christmas listened to what the very youngest Woodlanders hoped they would find in their stockings on Christmas Day.

"I will see what I can do," he promised. "For I am sure you have all been very good!"

All too soon, the afternoon was over and it was time for Father Christmas to say goodbye. And as the very youngest Woodlanders walked home through the gathering dusk, to their delight, softly and silently the first snow began to fall.

A Very Happy Christmas!

All this snow really makes everything look beautifully Christmassy," Mrs Wood-Mouse said to Mrs Shrew-Mouse, as they met outside Jack Daw's Stores two days before Christmas Eve. "Perfect for the Woodland School Carol Concert this evening, don't you think?" And to her surprise, Mrs Shrew-Mouse, who usually grumbled

about snow, rain and, sometimes, sun as well, agreed, saying how much she was looking forward to it.

That evening, the school hall was full of Woodlanders enjoying the clear, sweet voices of Miss Owl's pupils as they performed their carols. There were the old favourites, but some new ones too, including *The*

Softly Falling Snow. "Composed by Nerissa Nightingale as her special Christmas present to The Woodlands," Mr Rook announced.

The following day, the Woodland School broke up for the holidays and the little Woodlanders had lots of fun playing in the snow.

On Christmas Eve, The Robin Family set off for The Old Well House, where they were going to spend Christmas, taking

Roley and Rosemary's sledge, piled with gifts. With everyone pulling, they arrived at The Old Well House to a warm welcome, and were soon sitting down in the parlour, admiring the beautifully decorated Christmas tree.

"I do enjoy this time of year," Mrs Rosabelle chirruped, as she passed around a plate of mince pies, "I know we're going to have a very happy Christmas — as always!"

Daddy and the Dolls' House

No-one else is up and about as I enter the old playroom. The heating is on, but I shiver and pull my dressing-gown tighter. I know at once something is wrong. The dolls' house has been disturbed. Mae has fiddled with it and left the frontage ajar. I move across and realise she's also opened the tiny curtains to let the light in. I fuss and close them again.

'There, that's better,' I think. 'Now it's as it should be.'

I linger awhile. My fingers trace across the shingled roof and I adjust the mock ivy climbing the front wall. I tidy the living room and tweak the position of the furniture. Since Daddy's death, I've not been able to stop going through this daily ritual. Gran said people used to close their curtains following a death as a sign of respect, but to me it's more than that. It's something I can do to remember him by and all that he and the dolls' house meant to me. He's with me now, in this room and in my thoughts. He's so real, I feel I can talk to him.

It's now three months since the asbestosis finally took him and I still can't believe it. When he retired from work, suffering with his lungs shredded from the illness contracted in his early years as a carpenter, he couldn't let go. It seems like yesterday he was ringing me every day to ask how the latest job was progressing.

'You were secretly hoping I'd hit a snag, weren't you, Daddy, so I'd have to ask you for advice? Well, most times I made something up and let you air your superior knowledge.'

I smile now to think of it, but I did want him to feel appreciated and to know that

the little girl he loved still loved and needed him too.

'Yet it wasn't always so, was it, Daddy? When I was small, Ryan was your star, wasn't he? Two years older, good at sport and a boy as well. Ryan was into rugby in a big way and when he came home with the school cup at 12, that was the end of little old me. You always took Ryan to watch the league games. What was it you used to say to me? "Rugby's not for girls. You stay at home

earful, moments before you were off to a match with Ryan. "That's it," she said, "off you go as usual and leave Sally at home. You never do anything with her, yet she follows you about with adoring eyes like a lovesick puppy, hoping just once you'll give her a pat as you pass by. Forget your blooming rugby, be a father to her. Find something to do with her."

'You went off in a strop, but when you came back I knew

I tingled in anticipation of our Saturday mornings, our special time, before you went off with Ryan to a match or to watch him train. You brought home from work a discarded cupboard and some scrap wood. I'd no idea what woodworking was about and I couldn't see how that tatty rubbish could become the dolls' house you promised. But then we got to work and all that changed. There we'd be in the shed, knee-deep in sawdust and shavings, as you taught me how to use a saw, how to plane a piece of wood and how to hit a nail and not my thumb with a hammer. You were so patient when I'd burst into tears if things went wrong.

'You would take me in your arms and whisper, "There, there, keep trying love and it'll all come good." And you were right, for from those bits of rubbish the cupboard became the walls and floors and the scrap wood became the roof. Slowly, the finest dolls' house I'd ever seen

"Slowly, the finest dolls' house I'd ever seen emerged and I, a girl, had helped"

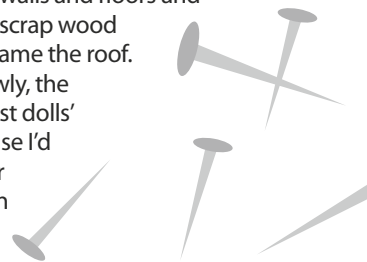
with your mum and do some girly things."

'I know you didn't mean to hurt me. That was how it was when you were young. The boys did all the exciting things and the girls learnt to cook, sew and knit. Even now the words knit one, purl one, fill me with horror.

'Do you remember, Daddy, the day it all changed? Mum was in the kitchen, giving you a right

Mum's words had hit their target. And that's when it began... our project. I was so excited when you said we'd build a dolls' house together and you'd teach me how to make the best one ever for almost nothing. I suppose, being a kitchen fitter, it was all you could think of, but it didn't matter. I loved the thought of having you all to myself.

'Each Friday after school,



the ouse



emerged and I, a girl, had helped to make it. I was so proud. As I grew older, long after the dolls' house was finished, we made other things and by then you let me use the chisels and the power tools and trusted me enough to let me work on my own. Oh Daddy, I miss you so...

'You had no right to die! I'm so angry, I spit out the words aloud. It all hurts too much. I wipe my eyes.

'Now look what you've done: you've made me mess up my make-up. I'd better get on, or else Tom won't get to work, Mae won't get to school and, as you used to repeatedly remind me, the business won't run itself.'

With the early morning routine over and the house empty, I gather up my tools and set off to my latest client to prepare an estimate for a new kitchen. I never quite knew how I came to follow in Daddy's footsteps, it just sort of happened. At first, I helped him at work in the school holidays and then, later, he encouraged me to take an apprenticeship in carpentry. Before I knew it, I had a diploma and was fully qualified. I loved it.

It was how I met Tom, when fitting a new kitchen for his mother. I keep telling him he only married me because I was cheaper than a builder. Tom's a whiz at technology, but his ability in DIY extends no further than his index finger tapping in

the phone number of the nearest tradesman.

He's lovely with Mae, though. Always takes an interest in what she's doing and she always drops everything and runs to him when he comes home from work. Not like her rubbish mother who, as far as she's concerned, provides her with meals and does her washing and that's about it.

Tom wasn't working from home today, so I left the job early to pick up Mae from school. Unusually for her, she couldn't wait to show me the patchwork bag she'd started making at Sew & Knit Club. The stitches were delicate, small and neat. Even to my unappreciative eye, I had to admit that although it wasn't finished, the intricate pattern was exquisite. I thought to myself, 'My little girl may only be 11, but she's really talented.'

As I passed the bag back to Mae, Daddy had to have his say in my head: 'OK, my girl, now it's your turn. You need to connect with your daughter.'

As I drive home, I think it's true. Mae's growing away from me as she becomes older, but how can I hope to compare with Tom, to have her love me as much as she loves him?

I try to say something encouraging in the car about how great the bag is, but it all sounds stilted and false. Mae isn't listening anyway. I give up and we drive home in silence.

When we arrive home, Mae disappears into her bedroom and I withdraw to the kitchen to prepare supper for when Tom comes home. The house is quiet.

Yet as soon as Tom turns his key in the lock, Mae's out of her room and down the hall to show him the bag.

I can hear from the kitchen her squeals of delight at his compliments. Excitedly, she tells him her next project is to knit a scarf for him in the local football team colours for him to wear at matches.

My heart shrivels at hearing them. I love it they relate so well together, but I wish that special bond was mine too. Yet all I know is kitchen fitting and carpentry. When I tried once to persuade Mae to join me in making a sewing box in wood, she turned up her nose at the idea. She shuddered at the thought of mucky sawdust and glue. I felt hurt and then guilty because she was not yet seven and only wanted to play with her dolls and the dolls' house.

she was making, so now I didn't bother.

When I go in there, she's knitting what looks like Tom's scarf. Beside her is one of her dolls, sporting a beautiful woollen jacket. I pick it up. "Wow! This is stunning, Mae," and I say, from the heart.

I can hear Daddy's voice in my head, 'Go on, go on, what are you waiting for?'

The words are out before I can stop myself. "Do you think, Mae, I could learn to knit something like this?"

Mae looks up from her knitting surprised. "Of course you can, Mum. Shall I teach you?" Before the words, "I'd love you to" are out of my mouth, she thrusts two needles and a ball of wool into my hands and she's showing me how to cast on.

Before long, I'm struggling. I drop a stitch and the ball of wool has knotted itself. I feel hysterical with frustration.

"Mae, I can't get it. I can't even keep the stitches on the needles. I'm hopeless."

"You'll get it, Mum... it just takes practice. Here, I'll show you."

Mae comes behind me and

“ Mae's cheek brushes against mine in the effort to make the stitch ”

After supper, as I clear away, Daddy's voice nags at me.

"All right. Enough!" I shout out loud. "I'll do something. Now leave me alone."

Mae puts her head round the kitchen door. "Mum, did you call me?"

"Er — yes, love," I lie. "I was thinking — after you've done your homework, why don't you let me see some other things you've made?"

I rarely ventured into Mae's room. It was a tip, littered with scraps of material, unfinished knitting and wool trailing over the floor. But it didn't bother Mae. If I tried to tidy it, she would get cross with me and tell me I'd ruined something

leans across, with her arms hugging me and her hands reaching forward towards the needles I'm holding. Her arms as they cuddle me make me feel strangely warm. I know now this is the way.

"I was thinking, Mae, as well as knitting you could teach me sewing, and we could make some new curtains and furnishings for the dolls' house together."

"Oh, Mum, that would be awesome!" Mae's cheek brushes against mine in the effort to make the stitch on my needles. As she does so, I swear that somewhere I can hear Daddy chuckling.

THE END

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A bit of a situation

She must have read the text a hundred times already but every time she did, she felt the same response — a sort of sickening thud in the pit of her stomach. And all because of Pixie

Irene would be a fool if she didn't sign up to the dating app, one of her co-workers, Heather, told her. It was free, easy to use and safe. Above all, it would transform her life. She didn't add that if anyone's life needed a transformation then it was Irene's, but then she didn't really have to.

The last time Irene had had a boyfriend, Gordon Brown had been Prime Minister and Heather had been two years away from doing her GCSEs. Come to think of it, Shane, the man she'd been dating around that time, had reminded her a lot of Gordon Brown. As well as being Scottish, he was thin-skinned, prone to hissy fits and woefully short on charisma.

It had been a relief when he told her he was being transferred back to Edinburgh, and that he'd understand perfectly if she felt she couldn't risk her company pension by moving from Glasgow to be with him when she didn't have another job to go to.

After he'd gone, she spent a

couple of days wondering if perhaps he'd been expecting her to make more of an effort to keep him. But relief at his departure outweighed any mild feelings of guilt about his possible broken heart.

If, over the years that followed,

— “ —
You couldn't have everything in this life, she told herself repeatedly

the satisfaction she'd initially felt at no longer having to defer to another person dimmed slightly, she chose to ignore it. She had friends, a nice flat and a good job that paid her tolerably well. You couldn't have everything you wanted in this life, she told herself repeatedly.

Recently, however, something

had changed. Perhaps it was her age. Every time she looked in the mirror, she saw yet one more wrinkle and another grey hair. She was a thoroughly modern woman. Was the rest of her life to be a passion-free zone?

Where was the harm, she thought, in going along with Heather's suggestion?

She hadn't thought she'd find her Mr Right on a dating app. Nor even her Mr Right Enough. She hadn't even expected anyone to 'swipe right'. Which, she'd quickly learned from Heather, was dating-app parlance for moving your finger across an image on your touch-screen phone of a person you might like to meet.

Who was she, after all? A woman nearer 50 than 40, who had never been terribly photogenic, even when she'd been at her prettiest. But within a week she'd had three hits, had coffee with all of them and arranged a second date with one. Geoff.

He was a history teacher. Two years older than her. A bit on the plump side, but she didn't mind

that because she was a little plump herself. He had a full head of hair — albeit grey — twinkly eyes and he told good jokes. He'd been married, so he told her towards the end of their first date, but she'd run off with one of her work colleagues. All that had happened five years ago, and it had taken him this long to get his confidence back to try dating again. That night, once she was back home, she found she couldn't stop thinking about him.

"Two-timing the new boyfriend already, are you?"

Irene jumped and snapped her phone shut. She was sitting at her desk, ready to begin her day's work, when Heather came swanning by.

"No, no," she blustered, her face red with embarrassment. "Just checking my messages."

"Any dirty ones?"

Irene didn't know where to put herself. Fortunately, Heather didn't wait for an answer but instead gave a snort of amusement and carried on her way. It was all front, Heather's banter, Irene knew. Deep down, beneath the bluster and the innuendo, she was thoughtful, kind, and a good listener. Irene would have appreciated someone to talk to right now — someone other than Geoff, that was. She couldn't possibly talk this over with Geoff, since he was part of the problem.



The other part was Pixie.

Geoff didn't know Pixie. After all, they'd only been together for a couple of months. If you could even call it 'together'. They'd taken things very slowly — Geoff didn't much like going out on a school night, which suited

Irene fine, what with one thing and another. So what dates they'd had, had been spread out over several weekends. Taking into account the week he'd been away on a school trip to Ypres because Year 10 were covering the First World War, that meant

that all in all they'd only had six dates at the most.

They'd last seen each other at the weekend. The two of them had gone out to lunch at a lovely village pub that got consistently brilliant reviews on Trip Advisor for its seasonal game pies. It had

been a lovely day. Bright sunshine but with a nip in the air, which made the roaring log fire in The Greyhound all the more welcoming.

Irene had made some comment about the Christmas decorations that were already up, even though it was barely December. Personally, she wasn't a fan of decorations until after the 20th, she'd said. But when they were as tasteful as these ones, then she could be persuaded. Was it the decorations that had reminded Geoff that Christmas was, if not exactly around the corner then near enough to start making plans about how to spend it?

She flipped open her phone again to sneak another furtive glance at the message she'd first read this morning on getting out of bed.

"Is it too soon to suggest spending Christmas together?" it said. *"Just the two of us?"*

She must have read it a hundred times already but every time she did, she felt the same response. A sort of sickening thud in the pit of her stomach. And all because of Pixie.

It was ridiculous really, the way she felt responsible for someone who was neither a relative nor a close neighbour. She wouldn't even have called Pixie a friend, really. As a matter of fact, most of the time she didn't even like her very much.

This was hardly surprising since Pixie Gallagher had been the woman who'd broken up her parents' marriage all those years ago. A floozy, so Mother had described her, as well as a string of other colourful collocations that had made the then-teenage Irene blush to the roots of her hair.

It hadn't lasted of course, her father's relationship with the floozy. He'd never been one to settle down. But once it was over, he'd made no attempt to return to the family home. Presumably once he'd rediscovered life as a single man, he had no intentions of putting his head back in the marital noose.

Irene and her mother had bumped along together once Dad had gone, until Irene finally plucked up courage to make a

A bit of a situation

run for it in her mid-20s, when a job came up in Glasgow. Of course, she'd made visits home over the intervening years. But she'd always had to give herself a stiff talking-to before she could bring herself to board the plane back down south. It seemed to her that Mother grew more bitter with every visit, and it was always a relief when it was time to leave.

When Mother died of a fast-growing cancer, Irene had been filled with so many conflicting emotions. Sadness, of course. This was her mother after all, who'd picked her up when she'd fallen over and sung her to sleep when the thought of the monsters under her bed had made her cry out in terror.

But there'd also been relief. No longer would she feel obliged to make any more visits to that dark house with its tiny rooms and low ceilings and the décor that hadn't changed in half a century.

Dad didn't turn up to Mother's funeral. Perhaps it had been foolish of Irene to imagine that he would. She'd shrugged off her disappointment, just like she'd learned to shrug off all those other times he'd disappointed her. When, in turn, he died, a more spiteful daughter perhaps would have stayed away from his funeral. But Irene was constitutionally unable to neglect her duty. So she did what she had to do and showed up at the church. Perhaps it was this old-fashioned idea of duty she'd clung to all her life that, over the years, had made it impossible for her to turn her back on Pixie Gallagher, too.

Sitting in the front row of the

church, her father's coffin directly in her eyeline, Irene had felt vulnerable and so very lonely. She was the last in the line, the only member of the family to attend. There were a handful of other mourners — old drinking chums of her father's. But nobody she recognised. No-one with a sympathetic face.

Pixie Gallagher was the only other woman present. Irene couldn't decide if she was to be pitied or loathed. On the one hand, she'd run off with her father when she'd been a vulnerable teenager. Not to

“
*Tears had made
two jagged
lines down
either side of
her face*
”

mention the fact that by doing so, she'd ruined her mother's life. On the other hand, look at her now!

She looked, quite frankly, a fright. She was dressed in a riot of pink, a purple hat like an upturned flower-pot perched on her orange hair — a wig, Irene had since found out. Just one of her large collection. Her make-up was a thick mask of orange foundation that stopped at her jawline. Tears had made two jagged tracks down either side of her face and her eye make-up was an even sorrier mess.

When the service finally

ended and Pixie left the church, she considered following her. Though what she would have said when she caught up with her, she hadn't yet worked out. “Excuse me, you don't know me but I recognise you from some old photos I found in my father's flat the other day, when I was clearing it out. You're the tart with the heart and the cleavage to match, who appears to be hanging off his arm while he raises a glass to the camera”?

But that was the kind of no-holds-barred dialogue that was best reserved for Irene's favourite soaps. It was hardly her style. In the end, what kept her in her seat was her usual quiet reserve. What was the point of picking over old scabs, she thought? Tomorrow, she'd be going back up to Glasgow. After today, their paths would never cross again.

Except they did. Not five months later. It was in the most unlikely of places — the supermarket where Irene did her shopping, just a few streets away from her flat off the West Road. She'd been minding her own business, filling her trolley with two-for-ones, even though she knew she'd never be able to consume all of it before the use-by-date ran out and feeling bad about the inevitable waste of it all.

As she made her way down the aisle, she became aware of a minor confrontation taking place ahead. A fat, red-faced man in a suit, wearing a badge that suggested he was probably the manager, was locked in verbal combat with one of his customers. Other customers looked on. They'd clearly decided this was the best bit

of free entertainment they'd had in a long while, since they were making no effort to move away. They stood about, nudging each other, comparing opinions, grinning gleefully at the argument that was unfolding before their rubber-necking faces.

The manager appeared to be accusing a little old lady of having slipped a packet of biscuits into her own — rather capacious — bag, instead of into the trolley. Irene was about to turn back the other way, embarrassed by the unsympathetic and insensitive way he was dealing with the alleged thief. No-one deserved to be made a laughing stock like this, even if she had been shoplifting, she thought. But then she realised who it was.

It was the hair that had initially confused her. The last time she'd set eyes on Pixie Gallagher, it had been red. Now, it was purple. The outfit had changed, too. Lime green this time. And scarves. Lots of scarves. The make-up was the same, however. The pan-stick, the mauve eye-shadow, the spidery lashes and the bleeding lipstick all combined was a salutary lesson in how to avoid applying your make-up.

Pixie was putting up a strong defence, it had to be said, and all in a very refined Scottish accent. Unless the store manager unhandled her right this minute, she'd call the police and have him for assault, she said, much to the delight of the onlookers. Irene couldn't help admire the woman's spirit.

There was more, too. Much more. How dare he accuse her of taking something she hadn't paid for? She'd never been so insulted in her life. Did he seriously think she would allow him to examine the contents of her shopping bag? Her own personal, private property?

It was at this point that Irene found herself stepping forward. “Could she have a word with the manager in private?” she said, drawing him to one side. It took a good five minutes, but in the end she managed to persuade him to let the old lady go without



pressing charges. She even said she could vouch for her. She'd known her years, she lied. And she'd no more dream of stealing food than she would dream of planting a bomb in the grounds of Holyrood. Stealing husbands, though, that was another matter altogether — but she didn't say that.

Half an hour later, the two of them were sitting across a table in a café across the street, drinking tea.

"I got myself into a bit of a situation, didn't I?" Pixie gazed across the table at Irene, a coy smile playing on her thin, ruby-red lips.

A bit of a situation didn't really cover it, as far as Irene could see. She was lucky not to have been hauled off the premises in a police van.

"It was very civil of you to come to my aid the way you did," Pixie added.

"It was nothing," Irene murmured. She'd thought the manager was very rude, she said, which was why she'd stepped in.

"If you'd left it another minute, I'd have lamped him one," Pixie replied.

The switch from dear little old lady to aggrieved, belligerent warrior almost took Irene's breath away. She didn't know what to think. Who had been right, the store manager or Pixie? Was there a packet of biscuits in Pixie's bag? It was an elephant in the room that she had no intention of tackling.

And when, halfway through their second cup of tea, Pixie finally introduced herself, Irene realised that here was another elephant. She could have said she knew very well who Pixie was. But what would have been the point? All that business with her father was a long time ago. If her mother had failed to make a life for herself after he'd left, then that was as much her mother's fault as Pixie's. And as far as she herself was concerned, she'd got over all that upset years ago.

It turned out they lived quite close to each other. A bus ride away, in fact. Pixie had lived in the same flat for 30 years, she said. It overlooked the park and held some very happy memories. Was my father one, Irene wondered, briefly forgetting the promise she'd made to herself to let sleeping dogs lie?

Once they'd drunk their tea and finished their scones and Irene had paid the bill, she could have left Pixie at the café door. But instead she took the bus back to Pixie's flat with her, stopping at the corner shop to pick up the bits and pieces Pixie still needed, because that unfortunate business at the supermarket had got in the way.

The thought of going back there was completely off the cards now, Pixie had said in the café, picking at the currants in her scone with her scarlet talons. She had no intention of ever showing her face in that establishment again.

Irene felt it would have been to cruel to remind her that, actually, she'd been

banned. How wonderful it must be to have such self-confidence, she thought, watching Pixie as, on unsuitable, high-heeled, leopard-skin ankle boots, she teetered to the ladies', head held high.

She did try to resist taking a peek inside Pixie's shopping bag to see if there were things in there that hadn't gone through the till back at the supermarket. But the temptation had been too great. She wasn't entirely surprised to see a packet of chocolate biscuits staring up at her.

So, for the last three years, this is how their relationship had progressed. Pixie would get herself in what she called 'a bit of a situation' and Irene would

— “ —
It had taken Irene the best part of a day to mop up the spillage

bail her out. There was the time she left the tap running in her bathroom, for example. It had taken Irene the best part of a day to mop up the spillage, as well as all the bother of locating a dehumidifier to dry the place out and dragging it into the back of her car while Pixie looked on, complaining about her bad back.

Then there was the time she locked herself out of the flat at one in the morning while she was putting out the rubbish. Irene had been sleeping at the time and had had the fright of her life when she opened the door of her own flat to discover Pixie standing there, dressed in a voluminous white nightdress with a woollen shawl pulled tight around her shoulders, looking for all the world like Mrs Rochester who'd just strayed down from the attic for a bit of malevolence. "I seem to have got myself in a bit of a situation," she'd said.

When Pixie's cat went missing,

Irene printed out posters and affixed them to the trees and lamp-posts that lined the streets around Pixie's neighbourhood. One day towards the end of September — the day before her first date with Geoff was due to occur, actually — she just happened to be passing by and thought she might as well pay Pixie a visit since she was in the neighbourhood. Lucky she did — she ended up having to put out a small fire in the kitchen.

It was this visit that had prompted Irene to make her offer. The same offer she was now deeply regretting, the closer it got to Christmas.

Pixie had still been in her dressing-gown, even though it was fast approaching noon. She seemed out of sorts, Irene couldn't help noticing. Her 'situations' were happening more and more frequently. So frequently, in fact, that Irene was even beginning to wonder if she ought to think about getting Social Services involved.

"Couldn't you smell the burning, Pixie?" she said as, trying not to panic, she flung a wet tea-towel over the frying pan that was fast becoming engulfed in flames.

Pixie didn't move from her chair. If the whole house had gone up in flames she wouldn't even have noticed, Irene couldn't help thinking.

"I smelled something," she said listlessly. "But I thought it was coming from the flat below."

There was a newspaper on her lap. Irene noticed it was open at the page marked Obituaries.

"If you don't take more care, I'll be reading your obituary sooner than I should be," she said.

Pixie had a ghoulish sense of humour. This kind of remark would normally have jollied her out of her bad mood. But not today.

"That might be the best thing," she replied, gloomily.

Irene decided the situation required a cup of tea. "Tell me all about it," she said, once the kettle had boiled and she'd presented Pixie with her usual mug of strong, black tea with two sugars.

"Everybody's dying, Irene,"



A bit of a situation

Pixie said, blowing on the steam. "Two more gone this week. All my friends are dropping like flies."

"So you thought you should hasten your own end too, is that it?"

She passed the biscuit tin across. Pixie took two, which made Irene think things couldn't be all that bad. But with Pixie's next remark, she wondered if her optimism had been a bit premature.

"What have I done with my life, Irene?" she said.

"Now, come on, Pixie. Have your tea, then get dressed and I'll take you out somewhere," Irene said. "We can go to the Botanicals. You love it there."

So far in their relationship, Irene had done an excellent job of keeping their relationship on a superficial level. They spoke about the weather, films they'd seen on the TV late at night and whatever happened to be in the news that day. Whenever it got personal, Irene steered the conversation back to something more neutral.

"I thought I'd found true love, once upon a time," Pixie said. "He was the love of my life. My grand passion."

The conversation was taking a turn Irene wasn't happy with. "Here, give me that before you spill it," she said, holding out her hand impatiently for Pixie's mug, which was looking none too steady.

"What's the matter? Is it too much for you to bear, the thought of an old lady like me having had a sex life?" A sly smile crept over Pixie's face. She was enjoying Irene's embarrassment. "I didn't have you down as a prude, dear."

Irene felt the colour rise in her cheeks. Here it was. She was about to get the whole story of Pixie's mad affair. And then, once she'd heard it, she was going to have to confess that she'd known about it all along and that in fact she was Pixie's lover's daughter.

Pixie wouldn't want to know her after that. She was bound to be suspicious. Why would Irene befriend an old dear like her, a woman who'd ruined her parents' marriage and deprived Irene of a father, unless she was just biding her time with a view to doing her in? Pixie read a lot

— “ —
She waited for Pixie to begin at the beginning and then proceed to the gory details

of crime novels. This was a scenario that would have been right up her street.

Why on earth hadn't she told Pixie right at the start that she knew who she was? Now it was too late. She was a firm believer that some things should be spoken of immediately or never spoken of again. A bit like that bit in the marriage service where everyone holds their breath when the Vicar says, "Or forever hold thy peace".

She waited for Pixie to begin at the beginning and then proceed to the gory details. But all she got was a

couple of sentences.

"This man — he was a little bit older than me. Swept me off my feet, he did. Told me he loved me, wanted to marry me. All the usual guff men come out with," she said. She stared into the distance, a smile playing on her face. "I was a silly girl back then and I believed him," she said. "But then I found out he was married. He even had a little girl. Well, I couldn't have that, could I?"

"No." The single word came out half-strangled.

"Dropped him like a hot potato, I did. After he'd taken the best years of my life. Gave up on all my ambitions. All the dreams I'd had before I met him."

Irene didn't dare move. She just sat there, thinking of ways to change the subject.

"Now look at me," she said after a while. "Spending my days reading obituaries. It'll be Christmas soon and this year I'll have no-one to spend it with."

That was when Irene came out with it. "Come and spend Christmas with me," she'd said.

For months now, she'd been able to put her reckless invitation to the back of her mind. But now it was the first week of December and since she'd given it, she'd met a man she suspected she was falling in love with. A man who, only this morning, had sent her a text that said, "*Is it too soon to suggest spending Christmas together? Just you and me?*"

In the same way she'd failed to mention that she knew about Pixie's relationship with her father, she hadn't so much as even uttered Pixie's name to Geoff. What was the matter with her? Why hadn't she ever

mentioned that she'd struck a sort of friendship with a mad old bat she'd once saved from being prosecuted for shoplifting who, by the way, just happened to have been her father's ex-bit on the side?

It's not as if Geoff had been backward at coming forward about his own family. His parents had been happily married for more than 50 years, he'd told her, round about their third date. But a couple of years ago, his mother had died and now his father was on his own. A total pain these days, apparently. Moody, taciturn and a bit of an embarrassment, especially when it came to political correctness and personal hygiene. That would have been an open invitation to reciprocate. The perfect opportunity. All she'd needed to do was open the door a crack and Pixie would have fallen out. She could have confided in him just how infuriating Pixie was, always borrowing money and never giving it back; ringing her up at inconvenient times, then getting all huffy when Irene said she couldn't chat about last night's *EastEnders* right now because she was about to go into a meeting. Asking her if she'd mind doing a little errand for her, it wouldn't take long, but which invariably ended up in causing Irene a huge amount of inconvenience. The list went on.

But she didn't utter a single word about the dratted woman. It was like she was stuck in a pattern. No, she had no ties at all, she'd said, when Geoff had asked her about her own family. Conned herself she was telling the truth, since Pixie wasn't actual family, was she? She was just a ball and chain around her ankle that she couldn't shake off.

The whole thing was ridiculous. She was going to have to come clean. Tell him that unfortunately she'd made other arrangements and that those other arrangements involved a crazy woman who wore lopsided wigs and make-up that looked like she put it on in the dark and whom she was, quite frankly, embarrassed by.

Except, she didn't do any of



that. Instead, after a glance at her work emails, which had mounted up to a frightening number while she'd been sitting at her desk and trying to work out which direction her life was going in, she switched her phone off and put it in her bag.

When she got it out again, it was lunchtime. There were six missed calls. Three were from Pixie, who'd left a series of lengthy messages when Irene hadn't picked up. The first said how much she was looking forward to Christmas. The second informed her that her favourite drink was Advocaat, if Irene fancied picking up a bottle or two. And the third insisted that Irene wasn't to think about buying her a Christmas present, because she didn't expect one and she hoped Irene didn't expect one either.

The other three were from Geoff. Her heart dipped. It was clear he had no intentions of giving up until she got back to him with her answer. When her phone rang again and his name flashed up on the

screen, she had no choice but to answer.

She decided to speak first, in case she lost her nerve. She remembered an article she'd read once in a woman's magazine about how to be assertive. Say no first. Only then, if you feel you need to, give your excuse.

"Geoff," she said, her voice a little trembly. "I can't spend Christmas with you. I have other plans."

There was a long silence before Geoff replied. "Oh," was all he said.

"I'm sorry," she said, before mentally kicking herself. Never say sorry, the article had said.

Another pause. Then, "Is there someone else?"

The very idea that she could possibly have two boyfriends at the same time completely threw Irene. Not to mention the fact that he actually sounded like a man who'd been deeply wounded. "Someone else? No! Of course there's no-one else," she said.

Except there was, of course. Hovering behind her, she sensed a disappointed figure wearing a badge with the words 'Irene's conscience' printed on it. Before it could speak first and tell her exactly how pathetic she was, she rushed in. "Yes," she said. "There is someone else. But it's not what you think." She found herself telling him everything. Suddenly, it was important that she got it all out. She told him about the first time she'd

spotted Pixie at her father's funeral and how confused seeing her had made her feel. And how confused about Pixie she'd felt ever since.

"I can't think why on earth I invited her to spend Christmas with me," she said. "She's bound to set my house alight or block my sink or fall down the stairs drunk on Advocaat and end up having to stay with me for the next six months 'til she's mended, like *The Man Who Came to Dinner*."

"Which man?" Geoff said. "Is this an ex you're talking about now?"

"It's a film," Irene said. "He was annoying, too. They were all glad to see the back of him, but then he slipped on the step and they had to put up with him even longer."

Geoff laughed. He actually laughed.

"Why was this so funny?" Irene asked herself. She'd poured out her heart to him and now he was treating it as a joke.

"Do you know why I was ringing you before?" he said. "And why I'm ringing you again?"

"To discover my answer, I presume," she said, aware she sounded like a character from a Victorian novel.

— “ —
It was bound to require a new outfit, too. Not to mention a new wig

"To cancel," he said. "Oh."

"Before you jump to any wrong conclusions, let me explain."

There was nothing more he'd wanted than to spend Christmas with Irene, he said. But then he'd had a call from his sister. "It's meant to be her turn to have Dad this year," he said. "But she's just learned her house has subsidence and she and her husband have to move out while it gets underpinned."

"Oh," Irene said again. They'd decided to seize the opportunity to fly to Australia to spend Christmas with their son and his family. Which meant that he was going to have to go up to Inverness and bring Dad down to Glasgow for the festive season. "It wouldn't be fair to expect you to put up with my father for two whole days," he said.

Irene's heart gave a little flutter. "Two days?" she said. "Were you inviting me for two days?"

Two days inevitably suggested the addition of a night.

"Yes. But that was then."

They'd reached deadlock. There was nothing more to be said. Her Christmas with Geoff — her two days linked by one night — was off.

"Unless..." Geoff said.

"Yes?"

"Well, if I'm going to order a turkey, I might as well order one big enough for four."

"Are you serious?"

"Think about it," he said.

"It's the perfect solution. Two is always easier to manage than one. They'd cancel each other out."

"Do you have room enough for all of us?"

She realised she'd never seen the inside of Geoff's house. Apparently, he had four bedrooms. When his ex ran off with her colleague, she felt so guilty she said he could keep the house and all its contents.

"And I'm an excellent cook too," he added.

"I'll have to think about it," Irene said. But she knew she was only stalling. Already she could imagine exactly how Pixie would jump at this change of plans.

Not just one man but two to flirt with. Just imagine the fun she'd have with that! It was bound to require a new outfit, too. Not to mention a new wig.

"Don't leave it too long," Geoff said. "I need to amend my order at the butcher's and he gets tetchy when people change their orders so late, at this time of year."

She was on it, she said. Like a bonnet, she added. Heaven knew where that silly little phrase had come from. It was probably one of Heather's. Speaking of which, here was Heather at her desk.

"Fancy a spot of lunch?" she said. "It's been ages since we had a catch up. And I want to know how things are going with you and your Geoff."

But Irene was already half way through dialling Pixie's number.

"Just a sec. I need to make a call," she said, glancing up. "I've got a bit of a situation."

Pinching other people's phrases. There she went again.

THE END

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When I started using a dating app, I ended up on a whole series of dates with the same three men at the same time — I even had to draw up a spreadsheet to keep track...

In my 30s, I became one of those women who juggled. In my case, though, it was boyfriends. Now, before you judge me too harshly, let me explain.

Around the time of my 30th birthday, I started using dating apps, and found I was kissing an awful lot of frogs without a princely payback. So, on the advice of a couple of my girlfriends, I took to dating two or three men a week, just to make a comparison between them all.

I hope that doesn't sound too mercenary. My friends said everyone knew the score, including the blokes themselves, who were probably doing the same thing. Plus, my friends said, all the men would be so useless, I'd only be dating them once, anyway.

I must have proved the exception to this dating rule because I ended up on a whole series of overlapping dates with the same three men at the same time. I even had to draw up a spreadsheet! It contained names, contact details and the dates of our dates.

One bloke made frequent business trips abroad, so I'd see him whenever he got back. The second

Overlap

worked shifts and could only see me on nights he wasn't at work or training for a triathlon, while the third also worked shifts, in his case managing a restaurant, so he tended to turn up on my doorstep at odd hours, bearing fragrant leftovers (to be perfectly honest, I was probably drawn in the first place to his jasmine-infused apricot pastries and chicken wings marinated in black truffle sauce. A girl can get used to those things).

My overlapping came crashing down around my ears

few hours after getting the lowdown, carrying a paper bag of satsumas which he plonked on my bed, saying, "I couldn't get seedless grapes." He then looked around nervously, said, "I'm a paid-up member of Hypochondriacs Anonymous," and sloped off to get a coffee. By the time he got back, visiting time was nearly over. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I'll come back tomorrow with the seedless grapes."

Before he could leave, however, number two arrived,

So he'd brought me racy lingerie instead!

"I didn't know where to look," snorted Jemma when he'd gone. "Especially when he said he could pick you up when you're discharged and drive you home via the pub. Maybe he could take you to a theme park for few goes on a rollercoaster while he's at it?"

Naturally, I had to come clean to Jemma about my overlapping. Luckily, she didn't judge (too harshly).

And number three? Well, at least he didn't overlap with one and two (or Jemma), flying in unexpectedly and romantically from a business meeting in Brussels, to sit by my bed, hold my hand and say, "I came as soon as I could. Angela, this has brought home what you mean to me. I hope it's not too soon to say this but — but I think I love you."

Talk about the grandest gesture of all!

And now my dating app days are over, and you find me on the verge of settling down, give or take the odd fly in the ointment — if that's an acceptable way to describe a seven-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy.

I always knew about Simon and Shelley — a father who'd kept quiet about them just because he was back in the dating game after his divorce would not have impressed me.

But I should have known from the off that I wouldn't be able to hack this earth mother lark, no matter how much Toby reassured me. It's not like he even pretended his kids were angels. Far from it.

This weekend, they are round at mine on a trial basis while Toby takes his mother on a whistle-stop tour of French

“I didn't make introductions but I think they got the gist”

when I was rushed to hospital with appendicitis. I came round from the operation with a lingering infection, and murmured my password to my sister Jemma, so she could get into my computer and deal with my emails from work.

She didn't find my spreadsheet, but I'd given her permission to give my password to a couple of my girlfriends at work. One of them got access to my computer remotely, found the spreadsheet — and took it upon herself to contact all three men on it, with an update on my health and my hospitalised whereabouts. When I confronted her later, she claimed she'd been trying to do me a favour: "They had to know you were in hospital, Angela! They'd each have been wondering why you'd suddenly gone to ground."

The first of my overlapping trio arrived at my bedside a

claiming he was late because "parking's a major mare in this place."

He eyed number one suspiciously. I didn't make introductions, but I think they got the gist.

Number one soon made some further excuses and left, bumping into Jemma on her way in. I was pretty sure I wouldn't see him again.

Number two asked me, "Who was that bloke?"

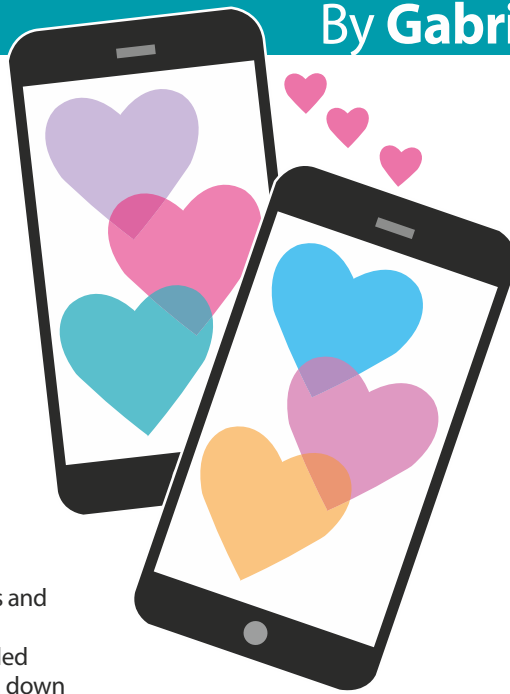
I said, "A friend," adding, "Is that for me?" pointing at a fancy carrier bag he was holding.

It was. He'd brought me a gift of a red silk negligée.

"How lovely," I murmured, conscious of Jemma's eyes on stalks.

"Thing is," said number two awkwardly, "I couldn't bring you food from the restaurant. It's against the rules, and you wouldn't be up to eating it anyway."

ping



vineyards for her 70th birthday. It wasn't a kid-friendly sort of trip and Toby thought it'd be a good opportunity for me to bond with the kids. His ex-wife Cheryl gave her OK, too, though I'm certain his mum doesn't approve of me 'muscling in' on her son.

First thing I got wrong was the ratio of chips to chicken nuggets when I slung them under the grill for Saturday lunch. Second thing was asking them questions that made their eyes roll. They were talking about their friend Danny, saying he was 'swan', when I interrupted to ask, "Why is he a swan?"

They rolled their eyes before Simon answered, "It means Syndrome Without A Name. His muscles don't work properly, among other things. But all SWAN sufferers have different things wrong with them."

I never know when they're pulling my leg, so I looked it up, secretly, and found there was such a thing as 'SWAN', and then I felt bad for their friend Danny.

By mid-afternoon, I was flagging so I sent them into the back garden to play. My back garden is a small hanky of well-behaved flowers. I hoped they'd use up some of their energy.

They were out there all of five minutes when Simon smashed a terracotta pot with a football, just missing the plant inside. Where had he even got a football?

I went out and found a gap in the bottom of my fence, through which a neighbouring boy carrying a football had snuck. I wanted to say, "Look at the state of my pot!" But, wary of playing to type, I just told them to be more careful and asked if they wanted

to go to a nearby park for a proper kickaround. Simon rolled his eyes and mimicked me saying 'kickaround', so I smiled grimly and crouched down to inspect the soil leaking from my broken pot, only to see that my precious plant was damaged.

Then — thwack! The football bounced painfully off my crouching bottom, Simon shouting, "He shoots, he scores!" while applauded by his appreciative audience.

Something inside me snapped. I ran to the hose, turned on the tap and turned the hose on Simon. But my aim was wayward and my dander was up, so I also managed to get the other kid and his mum, who'd just squeezed through the gap in my fence to inspect the source of all the commotion. Then, when I dropped the hose

who said (eventually), "No problem," led her son away through the gap, and mentioned over her shoulder that she had spare boys' clothes for Simon to borrow while his dried. I followed her to get them.

Back in the house, Jemma had already ushered the kids upstairs to have a hot bath and shower respectively (luckily, my shower's in the en suite), telling Shelley to throw on a big T-shirt of mine and some pants from my underwear drawer, with my nice, warm dressing gown on top.

I think we were all still a bit shocked at my outburst (me, most of all), but Simon mumbled, "Respect" as he came back down the stairs, Shelley

“ I'd had to come clean to Toby about overlapping. He understood ”

in shock, Shelley picked it up and gave her brother another dousing, just because she could. So he wrestled it off her and gave her a soaking.

In fact, I was the last dry person standing when Jemma appeared through the side gate as my unannounced cavalry, and asked in shock, "What on earth is going on?"

While she shoved wet clothes into the tumble dryer, I apologised profusely to my neighbour/other boy's mother,

said my dressing gown was much nicer than hers, and Jemma made us all hot chocolate with marshmallows on top.

And then I told them, because the boundaries had been breached, when they asked me with non-rolling eyes, how I met their dad.

"Well, I'd already met him, as you probably know," I explained, sipping my hot chocolate, "via a dating app for a few nights out, nothing serious. Then he came

to the ward where I was recovering after having my appendix out. He was absolutely useless. He gave me some mouldy satsumas and did a runner. He did come back again, this time with grapes, and then he asked if I had change for the coffee machine — how that man can drink coffee! — and apologised for being ill at ease in hospitals. It took a while, but after that, we got talking properly."

I sort of smiled at the memory, Simon and Shelly nodding sagely. "It's 'cos of his job as an ambulance driver," said Shelley. "He hates visiting people he cares about in hospital 'cos he sees people suffering, day in, day out. It's a bit of a cop out, really," she added, wise beyond her years.

But luckily, I'd gradually started to understand their dad in a three-dimensional way. I realised he trained for and ran triathlons so doggedly to try to deal with the pressure of his day job.

A bit like most of us, in a way, I suppose — outwardly calm and coping on the surface but, in reality, constantly paddling for dear life out of sight.

Anyway, when Toby ate all the seedless grapes he'd brought and asked about seeing me again when I was out of hospital, it was a funny thing, but I found myself forgetting all about poor Robert, he of the grand gesture, who'd dashed over from Brussels to say he thought he loved me. In a way, he did. But he kind of loved himself for making the gesture just that little bit more.

Of course, I'd had to come clean to Toby about all the overlapping. He understood. He even thought it was funny — and eventually even admitted, as my girlfriends had predicted, that he'd done a bit of overlapping himself in the past.

As for Jeff, the third man in my triangle, I never could get past his red negligée.

I did keep it, though. I just hope Shelley didn't find it when she was upstairs, looking for pants.

THE END

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All over by Christmas

It must be awful for the evacuees to be homeless at Christmas. A bit like Mary and Joseph really, Elsie thought

They said it would be all over by Christmas. But that had been five years ago and there was no sign of the war letting up yet.

Elsie wriggled her toes before the dying embers of the fire as she listened to her favourite carol on the radio, and wished her son Richard could have been home for Christmas. But it was 1944 and his leave from the RAF had been cancelled. She heard the drone of a plane and hoped it was one of theirs returning safe and sound. Richard was a navigator with the Lancaster Bombers and every day she prayed he'd come home safely.

As he wouldn't be there, Elsie hadn't bothered with much, only the nativity set which, she felt, was what Christmas was all about. She'd been a widow since Richard was a baby, when Ern had been killed in an accident.

"Evacuees? Two days before Christmas?" Elsie couldn't believe her ears when Miss Tremlett had called.

"There's really nowhere else for them to go," she replied. "A young mother and her daughter. She lost her husband a couple of years ago and..."

Elsie sighed. The last evacuees had only just gone back to London and, to be truthful, she'd been glad to see the back of

them. The hadn't taken to life in Cornwall at all well. It wasn't their fault, but the two boys were so boisterous, chasing the chickens and running through the vegetable patch. She'd had to put away a number of personal items for fear they'd be damaged and had only just brought out her beloved dolls' house again. And their mother hadn't liked the fact there was very little in the way of a social life in the village.

"Please." Miss Tremlett's voice held a hint of pleading. "I'm sure they won't be any trouble."

As soon as Miss Tremlett had left, Elsie cursed herself for agreeing but, as she'd said, they had nowhere else to go. And it must be awful to be homeless at Christmas. A bit like Mary and Joseph, really. She knew Cornwall had it easier than some other parts of the country and was grateful every day that their village escaped the bombing.

Ern always used to say anyone could make something from nothing if they tried hard enough and had a little imagination. Like the nativity set. He'd carved the figures himself from just a piece of wood when Richard was a baby and she'd used it every Christmas since. Mary and Joseph watching over the baby Jesus in his tiny

manger, the ox, donkey and sheep contentedly standing in the background, three wise men on camels, an angel guarding over them all and the star attached to the top of the stable. They weren't play things but memories of her time with Ern, and she felt a tingle of magic as she set them up each year.

Ern had also made the dolls' house she loved so much. When Richard was born, Ern had made him a train from some old pieces

as they'd left, she'd got it out again. It symbolised hope for the future — maybe one day Richard would marry, have a family and there would be another little girl to play with it.

"Very kind of you," commented Mr Simpson in the village shop when Elsie went in to use the last of her coupons, "taking folk in just before Christmas."

"There isn't much arranged," she replied, "but I'll just have to make do with what I can find."

Mr Simpson added a little extra sugar to Elsie's bag. He'd always had a soft spot for her.

She managed to get hold of two rabbits to make a pie for Christmas dinner, and she could make a cake because they were lucky in the country, being able to get hold of fresh eggs. A bit of holly with bright berries would cheer things up, too.

"Lorna, this is Mrs Jenkins, and this is Lorna's little girl, Hattie." Miss Tremlett introduced them all with a smile, although Elsie could see she was a little nervous. Elsie surveyed the evacuees standing before her. Why, there was nothing to the young woman, thin as a rake she was, dark hair framing her face and the little girl clutching tightly to her hand. And both so pale. Elsie's heart softened.

"I'll leave you to it," and Miss Tremlett was gone, leaving the three of them together.

"A nice cup of tea is what you need," said Elsie. "Take your coats off, love." She smiled at Hattie. "And would you like a nice glass of milk?"

But Hattie shrank away and clung to Lorna.

“*She managed to get hold of two rabbits to make a pie for Christmas dinner***”**

of wood he'd picked up, painted it red, white and blue, and Richard had loved it. Then, when she was expecting again, Ern made the dolls' house, feeling sure the baby would be a little girl. Just a simple house with a front which swung out to reveal a kitchen and sitting room downstairs, and a flight of stairs leading to two bedrooms, all containing beautifully carved tiny furniture. But Ern had been killed down the tin mine and the little girl was born early through the shock of it all and hadn't survived. Elsie had never put the dolls' house away, until the evacuees came, and as soon



"Thank you," Lorna said. "I'm afraid Hattie's been frightened by the bombing and lately I just can't get a smile out of her or even get her to speak."

Elsie noticed tears welling in Lorna's eyes and realised she was exhausted. "Have a cuppa and then I'll show you your room," she replied.

The next day was Christmas Eve and Elsie was determined to coax Lorna out of her shell and raise a smile from Hattie but, try as she might, didn't have much luck and, after a seemingly long and difficult day, it was almost Hattie's bedtime.

Away In A Manger, Elsie's favourite, began to play on the radio. "Can I tell Hattie the Christmas story and show her the nativity set?" she asked. She took Hattie's hand and told her all about the baby Jesus and how there was no room at the

inn, and although she listened wide-eyed, Hattie said nothing. Then Elsie showed her the dolls' house with its tiny furniture but, again, Hattie simply looked and eventually stuck her thumb into her mouth. "And now to bed before Father Christmas comes," Elsie said.

She glanced at Lorna who looked startled, and Elsie realised there had been no time to prepare for a visit from Father Christmas at such short notice. But, as Ern always said, you could make something out of nothing and an hour later, after finding a stocking for Hattie to hang on the end of her bed and getting her to sleep, Elsie and Lorna were sitting by the fireside, making presents for her.

"I lost my husband when Hattie was a baby," said Lorna. Elsie nodded.

"And just recently I met someone else, only a couple of times at a dance, and we just clicked. You know? When it's exactly right, like you've known that person for years."

“*She'd never felt it with anyone else in all those years since*”

Elsie nodded again. It had been like that with her and Ern. She'd never felt it with anyone else in all those years since and

wondered if perhaps it was a once-in-a-lifetime happening.

"He made me feel like everything could be good again," continued Lorna. "And he made me laugh. There was a spark between us. It was the first time I'd felt like that since my husband was killed. And then he wasn't at the next dance and then there was more bombing and we came down here."

Elsie sighed. There was sadness everywhere in this war, romances over before they'd even begun. She patted Lorna's hand and held up the bobble-hat, quickly knitted after unravelling an old jumper of Richard's. "Will she like it?"

"She'll love it," replied Lorna, mustering a smile. "I love the red colour and we won't lose her if she's wearing that. What about this?" She held up a rag doll she'd made from an old piece

All over by Christmas

of material with wool for hair and a smiling face drawn on.

"A couple of sweets in the toe and Father Christmas really will have visited," said Elsie, smiling.

Next morning, Elsie rose early to bring in plenty of logs for the fire. It had snowed in the night, creating a magical landscape, and she wondered if Hattie might be tempted to help build a snowman later. But just as she reached the back door, arms loaded with kindling and logs, she heard a scream from upstairs. Dropping the wood, she rushed up the stairs to find Lorna standing, white-faced, in the middle of the bedroom.

"She's gone!" Lorna turned frightened eyes to Elsie.

"Don't worry, love," Elsie said. "She can't have gone far. She must be in the house. Let's go and have a look."

Conscious of leaving the back door open when she'd dropped the logs, she quickly checked outside but there were no small footprints in the snow and, with a sigh of relief, she began to search the house. Then she heard a sound. Like someone humming — was it *Away In A Manger?* Very soft and gentle.

Elsie gently pushed the door of the front room open. The first thing she noticed was that her beloved nativity set was empty. No, not completely — the animals were still there and the star and angel, but the other figures were missing. Then she noticed Hattie kneeling before the dolls' house, playing with something inside and humming happily to herself. On her head was the bobble hat and beside her lay the rag doll.

Elsie moved forwards and saw that Hattie had taken the figures from the nativity set and moved them into the dolls' house. She gasped. It was almost sacrilege, playing with the figures like that.

Hattie turned, a small smile on her face for the first time since she'd arrived. "Baby Jesus," she

said slowly. "Waiting for Father Christmas in his house."

The baby Jesus was in the bedroom, Mary and Joseph in the kitchen, the wise men in the living room and the animals in the stable. Strangely enough, the figures fitted exactly and looked just right. Then Hattie's smile faded and her chin began to wobble, obviously afraid she'd done something wrong.

"Why, you little..." began Elsie, taking a deep breath at the sight of her beloved things being played with "...darling," she finished, as she realised that Hattie had spoken for the first time since she'd arrived. "What a clever girl you are, giving baby

“
Maybe this
year, the war
really would
be over by
Christmas

Jesus and his family a lovely home." She moved towards Hattie and enveloped her in a big hug, feeling the little body relax into hers, and her own eyes blurred with tears.

"Oh, Hattie," Lorna said, kneeling beside them. "This is the best Christmas present ever!"

There was a thumping sound outside, a curse and then a loud knocking. Elsie and Lorna looked at each other in horror.

"Well, it can't be Germans. They wouldn't have knocked!" Elsie said, trembling. She pushed Lorna and Hattie behind her then moved towards the door, opening it a fraction before hearing a familiar voice.

"It's only me!"

Elsie sighed with



relief. Mr Simpson! But why would he come on Christmas morning? Had something happened?

"Tripped over some logs outside," he said, dripping snow all over the floor like a walking snowman. "A message from Richard. Nothing to worry about. Coming home for New Year. Isn't that wonderful?"

Elsie's heart lifted and, five minutes later, they were all sitting round the table with a pot of tea. "Would you like to stay for lunch with us?" asked Elsie, but Mr Simpson shook his head. "I've been invited to my sister's, so better get going."

"How about coming for New Year then?" she asked on the spur of the moment.

Lorna and Hattie were making crackers and hats from newspaper, and the aroma of lunch roasting filled the house. Hattie was wearing the red bobble hat, and clutching the rag doll. There was the sound of a motorbike outside. "It's Richard!" Elsie cried.

Lorna smiled a wobbly sort of smile. "I hope he doesn't mind us being here," she said.

The door burst open and Elsie flung herself into Richard's arms. Then she pulled him inside. "We have two people staying with us," she explained. "This is little Hattie and..." Elsie paused as she watched Richard's face, which turned from complete surprise to astonishment.

"Lorna!" he said.

"Dickie?" Lorna gasped, then suddenly she was in his arms.

At that moment Mr Simpson arrived,

bearing homemade wine. They had no idea what was going on, but their eyes met and somewhere in the back of her mind, Elsie heard a click.

"So how do you two know each other?" asked Mr Simpson as they sat at the table later, enjoying New Year's Day lunch.

"We met at a dance," explained Richard. "Only a couple of times, and then I was called away..."

"So this is the young man you were telling me about?" Elsie smiled. How wonderful that it had been her Richard.

Later that afternoon, after they'd all played Snap with Hattie, Elsie noticed Richard and Lorna giggling together. She took Hattie's hand. "Come on," she said. "Let's show Mr Simpson the dolls' house." "And Ern," she thought, 'maybe there will be a little girl to play with it now.'

Mr Simpson followed them. "I think you should call me Bert."

Elsie felt a small flutter deep inside. Just over a week ago she'd been sitting on her own, wishing Richard could be home for Christmas, and now there were five of them here and it was like a proper family again. There was sadness in this war, but happiness too, coincidences bringing people together, and love found as well as lost. She smiled as Hattie and Bert bent over the dolls' house together.

Today was the first of January 1945, a whole new year for them all. Who knew what it might bring? And maybe this time, thought Elsie, the war really would be over by Christmas.

THE END

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Unsaid

I can't believe we're talking about the flaming weather! There's so much more I want to say to you. Like I miss your goofy smile

Things

I'm sitting in my kitchen, wondering what to have for tea, when a thought pops into my head. I should eat more organic kale. It's not my thought, that's for sure. Donuts are more my style. But it does give me an idea.

I reach for my phone.
'Hi Ben, I don't suppose you've still got that recipe for kale tray bake, have you? I'm thinking of making one later. Meg.'
 (I don't suppose there's much chance of you reading this message, let alone answering it, but it's worth a try.)
'Yep. Here's the link. bestrecipesforkale.com'

(Bit curt. But then again, I wasn't expecting you to answer at all. Certainly not within five minutes. Not when we finished on such bad terms.)

'Thanks, Ben. PS. I hope you're having a fun Saturday.'

(Actually, I hope you're not having too much fun. I'm not. I wish we hadn't split up. I'm really missing you. I spent this morning cleaning the flat, trying to erase everything that reminds me of you, but it didn't work.)

'Not having a bad day, thanks, Meg. Been clearing out the box room. About time I did that.'

(The box room — ouch! We earmarked that for our nursery, didn't we? Back when we were happy and planning a future together.)

'Hey, well done. I guess you'll have found out what colour the carpet is now then. Or if it even had a carpet!'

'Cheeky mare!'

(Oops, I've overstepped the mark already — and we're not even speaking on the phone. Maybe it's a good job we're not.)

'PS, what are you doing, Meg? Are you up to anything fun?'

'Besides cooking, you mean?'

Ha ha! I might have a walk. Nice sunny afternoon, isn't it?'

(The truth is, Ben, I might need to get out of the flat. Every single thing in it reminds me of you!)

'Yes, it's sunny here too.'

(Well, that's not surprising, as we're only five miles apart! I can't believe we're talking about the flaming weather! There's so much more I want to say to you. Like I miss your goofy smile. I miss the way you sing while you're in the shower. I miss the way you leave your leather jacket hanging over the backs of chairs. I even miss the way you never shut cupboard doors. I didn't think I'd ever say that!)

'Bye for now then, Meg.'

Thanks for the chat. Speak soon. X'

(Oh no, don't go. Although you have put an X. That must mean something, mustn't it? And it sounds like you want to chat again. Or were you just being polite?)

'PS, I suppose I'd better let you get on with that kale tray bake. X'

(What kale tray bake? Oh yes, the one I asked you about. I don't want to get on with that. I want to carry on talking. So do you, by the sound of it. How can I keep you talking?)

'Plenty of time for cooking. So what are you up to this evening? XX'

(Please don't tell me you've got a fun date lined up with some new lady. I don't think I could bear it.)

'Oh, nothing much. Maybe I'll vacuum the carpet now that I can see it. LOL. Oh, and I might get a takeaway.'

(Is that a hint? Should I ask you round? I wish I knew what you were thinking. I don't want to set myself up for rejection. No more kisses either. What the heck! I'm going to take a risk and invite you anyway.)

'You're welcome to join me, Ben. There'll be plenty of tray bake. If you've nothing on, I mean?'

(That was pretty cool, wasn't it? No kisses my end either. You can say no and we can both walk away with our heads held high.)

Ten minutes later.

'I guess you've gone then.'

The silence is deafening. Clearly, it wasn't a hint. I should

realised that last one of mine didn't send. The signal's a bit in and out here. No wonder you didn't answer it. Now I'm in a quandary. Maybe fate intervened to stop me making a fool of myself. So should I send it now? Or shouldn't I? If you were that interested, you'd have said something else, wouldn't you?

I get up and cross to the window. There's a better signal there usually. Hang on. That looks like your car parked outside. Is it? I can't just run out and check. Mind you, I do need to put the recycling bins out.

"Meg, um, hi." You look red-faced as I open the garden gate.

"Oh, Ben. Hi!" We both need to work on our 'surprised' voices, I think.

You reach across to open the passenger door and I climb in.

"So how long have you been sitting there?"

"For ages. I was passing when I got your first text."

"Why didn't you say?"

"I didn't know how welcome I'd be."

"You'd have been very welcome." I reach for your hand and suddenly we're in each other's arms, or would be if the handbrake wasn't in the way.

You smell so good. You smell of old leather and mints. You smell of... you.

"Why don't you come in now?" I say. "I could make us some supper — later, I mean."

"On one condition."

"What?" I smile. "I don't care what it is. Right now, I'd do anything for you. I love you so much."

"That we don't have kale tray bake. I can't stand it."

"It's a deal," I say. "To tell you the truth, I can't stand it either."

THE END

© Della Galton, 2018

“
I haven't got the ingredients for kale tray bake anyway. It was just an excuse
”

feel annoyed with myself, shouldn't I? For caving in and texting you. Or maybe annoyed with you. But I don't. I just feel sad. I haven't got the ingredients for kale tray bake anyway. It was just an excuse to get in touch. I can't even remember what that final argument was about.

Five minutes later.

Doh! I've been reading back through our messages. I've just

Most people hate working nights, but I really don't mind. The transport café where I work is part of a huge rest stop for weary travellers, just off the motorway. A hotel chain and petrol pump stand in the same enormous car park. The café's big, too; an acre of white tiles spreads out before the counter. The tables share the same shade of light green as the plastic chairs. It does have a somewhat antiseptic hospital air about it all, but nobody ever complains, certainly not any of the lorry drivers.

Now, at 2am, most of those lie in the back of their cabs, fast asleep. Myself and Ashley (it's just us, as young Jess called in sick earlier on) have three customers: two lorry drivers having a very animated conversation, and one B-list celebrity.

Behind the counter, Ashley stands wide-eyed. "I'm almost, almost sure it's him." She'd said the same for 10 minutes, ever since the tall, blond young man walked in. I'd filled his order for a sandwich and coffee, while she'd stood gawping without uttering a word.

Only after he'd wandered off to a faraway table did she dare speak up. "I think that's Liam Cox, the comedian. He's in a lot of those funny quiz shows. I watch him on catch-up on the internet."

I'd never heard of him.

Now, behind the counter, Ashley heaves a sigh. "I'd love his autograph."

"You could just go and ask him for it."

"I can't. I daren't." Her long lashes flap. She's only 19. "That's the trouble with people you really like on the TV. You're always worried they might be a bit of a let down in real life."

"You can't spend your life being scared of things like that." I'm 42 myself. I do see it as my job to guide along the younger generation at work. In fact, the girls have called me a cross between an agony aunt and Wonder Woman before now.

"I mean, I wouldn't be married

now, if I hadn't talked to my Rob," I say. "He'd have dithered forever, then where would we have been? You know my motto?" I frown.

What motto shall I choose tonight? A lot of wise words turn up via my Facebook feed, little nuggets of inspiration attributed to the famous, the clever and even the long-dead. "A few moments of insane bravery can change your life forever," I say eventually, having no idea who said it first.

Ashley looks suitably impressed. "I wish I was more like you, Kelly — all strong and brave." She gazes across the café to the dark corner where Thingy sits. "I don't have any paper here anyway, so how can I ask for his autograph?"

"I have a notebook in my bag.

I'll fetch it for you."

In the kitchen, in the corner where we hang our coats and sit during our tea and food breaks, I pick up my bag. I set it on the table, then ferret about inside. When I come across my phone, I open up the latest set of pictures of my family.

I'd shown the whole set to Ashley earlier. Rob stands in one snap, his bald head glistening in the sunlight as he bends down to work on our new kitchen extension. Rachel, now sweet 16, and Jake, who is 14, gurn instead of smile in another picture, taken in the lounge. I really wouldn't

have the life I do if I hadn't walked right up to Rob in a pub back when I was Ashley's age and opened my mouth. Fortune does favour the brave.

As if on cue, Ashley sticks her head round the door and I resume my search: tissues, make-up, one more pizza flyer.

“Comedians these days, it seems, look like the members of boy bands”

"Here you go — one notebook... and the pen Rob bought me last Christmas. Isn't it lovely?"

Ashley waves it away. "I'm still not sure I can do this."

"Why not? What's the worst thing that can happen if you do?"

"He might be mean or rude or something. I really don't want to not like him, after liking him for so long. Could you do it for me, Kel? Please?" She stands looking just like Bambi after he'd lost his mother.

"Oh, all right then."

"Thank you! You're the best ever." She gushes while I glow like a beacon. Am I? It's always nice to be admired.

Back in the café, I take a very purposeful walk across the acre of tiling. I pass the lorry drivers by and reach the furthest corner of the room. The suspected celeb wears a tight T-shirt that shows off his bulging biceps. Comedians these days, it seems, look like the members of boy bands.

"Hello there. Is your sandwich OK? Can I get you anything else?" Small talk's always a very useful tool if you need to judge somebody's mood at this time of the morning.

"I'm fine, thanks."

I'll blunder on then. "I just wondered if... you're Liam Cox? My co-worker's a big fan and she'd love your autograph." I wave my notepad. "I did tell her to do this herself, but she's a bit shy. I mean, if you are... him?"

He nods. "I am, actually."

"Oh great... So..."

"I'd love to." He takes the notepad and pen I offer. "OK, so what's your friend's name then?"

"Ashley."

Comic Tim

The girls at work have called me a cross between an agony aunt and Wonder Woman before now, but they don't realise I'm not always as strong as I seem on the surface

ing

He scrawls out a message and his name then hands the pad back.

"At least you didn't ask for a joke. That's what I normally get 'Tell us a joke, Liam', they usually say."

"And do you... tell them a joke, I mean?"

"I kind of see it as all part of the job. You know, like being on social media Facebook, Twitter, that kind of thing. I even keep a few gags lined up that fit the setting. I have newsagent jokes, supermarket jokes, garage jokes." He looks rather smug at the effort he's put in. "I even have one about night-shift workers." He laughs. "I bet you'd like to hear that one, wouldn't you?" He launches right into it without a yes or no from me.

I swallow hard, my insides curling into a tiny ball as prickly as a hedgehog as he goes on. His joke centres around a husband and wife. The man isn't too happy with his lot, it turns out. I feel sick as he finishes with a flourish and a punchline. I force out a fake giggle so he doesn't think I'm sour-faced. "Well, thanks for that, Liam. I... I had better get back to work now."

I walk back to the counter while biting my lip.

When Ashley sees me, she gives a start. "Goodness, are you all right?"

"Yes," the word quivers as I hand over the notebook. "Here you go one autograph."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine." "You can cope with anything," I tell myself. "That delivery driver and his lewd comments, the young men who play up in here and behave like chimpanzees, those rude customers complaining about things you can't control. You need to be strong. You can't collapse into tears at every little setback."

As I go behind the counter, Ashley reaches out to me. She touches my arm and my defences wobble.

"Was it that joke he told you? I heard a bit of it from here."

"Oh, did you? Lovely." I skirt by. That punchline had been a killer blow. It had hit me right in the heart.

"I've found a cure for arguing with my wife," the character in the comic's long-winded gag had

announced. "I found her a job on nights. We get on great now we see only see each other for three hours a day."

Ha-flaming-ha. My lower lip wobbles as I slump into a seat at the table in the kitchen. I hang my head to try to hide my emotions as young Ashley skitters in, then dithers. It isn't her young celebrity crush who'll disappoint her tonight, it'll be me, the woman she looks up to.

"Oh, er..."

"Why don't you leave me alone for a bit?" I wipe at my eyes.

"Oh no, I can't if you're upset. You don't have to tell me what's wrong, but I would like to help somehow. That's what you'd do, isn't it?"

I really don't relish being on this side of the equation. I've always been the helper, not the one being helped.

"I know!" She rips off the autograph from my book and sets a fresh page in front of me. "Sometimes when you're struggling with your feelings, it helps if you write things down."

"Who told you that?"

"You need to be strong. You can't collapse into tears at every little setback"

"You did, when my gran died." "Oh, yes of course. I remember that I did now."

"Where's your pen?"

My heart constricts. Rob had given me it for Christmas, wrapped up so carefully with a silver bow on top. He'd kissed my cheek and said, "I love you" before he'd handed it over. "I must have forgotten to take it back after your comedian's... joke," I tell Ashley.

"I'll fetch it for you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'll get it. You make yourself a cuppa. I won't be a sec."

I do just that. I make myself a cup of tea. The water in my cup gains a little salt, thanks to the tears dripping down my face. What do I need to tell Rob?

Oh yes...

'Rob, I've been a fan of yours for years. I truly, honestly, have. Only, I don't know if you've realised this but I'm hiding out on nights now. I know when I started here it was the only shift I could get but the truth is, I had an offer recently to transfer to days and I turned it down. I didn't want to deal with our marriage, you see, and this way, I hardly ever see you in bed. That's why I was so happy you started building the kitchen extension, too. Since you're working so hard, we could both claim to be too tired to deal with any of it. I don't think we've kissed since Christmas, have we? That was six long months ago. I try to act all brave and pretend everything's fine, but I'm scared now. I'm scared we'll be like this forever. I'm scared we'll never sort it out.' I frown. Where's Ashley and my pen? This all needs to come out.

I hurry out to the counter and peer into the corner. There she stands, smiling at the man she was so worried would disappoint her. She holds my precious pen safe

in her hands.

'You see,' I tell myself, 'the things that scare you are very rarely as awful as you think they're going to be. Not being the one handing out all the help isn't so terrible either, is it? It's good to be vulnerable sometimes. It's good to stop seeing yourself as some kind of invincible, unshakable... idol. They do tend to fall, you know.'

I nod to myself. From now on, I think I'll stick to one just one motto.

Asking for help isn't a weakness — it's a strength.

It's high time I become one of those people who do hate working nights.

THE END

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Feliz Navidad

Erin suspected that her husband thought all cold was the same, and she could never explain the thrill of a frosty winter morning



Laden with parcels, Erin stopped before the Christmas display in the huge, glitzy Mexican shopping mall. Despite the sun beating down outside, here mechanised elves cheerfully assembled toys while rabbits hopped in the snow. A robin sang valiantly. Erin stared at the little bird and

tears were streaming down her cheeks. It was time to go. She braced herself before stepping out into the Mexican sun.

At eight months pregnant, Erin struggled with the heat. Truth was, thousands of miles from home, she was struggling with Christmas, too.

Every shop front was as gaily decorated as back home. The music was as upbeat and

familiar. But in the sunshine, the sound of sleigh bells was just plain wrong.

She trudged back to the car feeling hot, sticky, and homesick for the wintry Christmas shopping trips she was used to.

She parked the car by the old, ranch-style house that had been her and Miguel's home for just over a year now. She loved living here, and having the beach at the bottom of the garden was a dream come true. But today she would have given it all up for a walk down a wintry Yorkshire lane.

Inside, she threw the patio doors wide. The traditional thick stone walls and deep-set windows did an excellent job

of keeping the house cool.

Stepping out onto the decking, she looked down to the beach, seeing white sand, blue sky and turquoise waves, and all the while longing for the stormy grey waves of Scarborough beach in December. She was still there when Miguel came home.

"Erin?" She heard his cheerful voice but couldn't stir herself. He came out onto the patio. "Hi, sweetheart. What's wrong?" he asked anxiously.

Erin shook her head and swiped at her eyes, feeling stupid. "I'm fine. It's nothing."

"You're upset. Tell me."

"I went Christmas shopping," she sobbed.

He nodded. "And?"

"And they had a robin in the shopping centre."

Miguel waited on edge for the end of that story, for the reason

for the tears. "And?" he prompted again.

"A robin!" she wailed. "We have a robin in the garden at home every winter. I used to watch for him and then I would know it was nearly Christmas."

"A robin?" Miguel didn't have a clue what she was talking about.

"A little bird with a red breast. It means winter. And Christmas and snow and... and..."

"Ah, you're homesick."

She supposed so, but the word didn't do justice to how awful she felt. "Yes," she sniffed.

"Tell me what you're missing?"

She snuggled against him.

"Well, Mum and Dad of course."

"Remember your mother's face when she was here last Christmas and saw the poinsettias? She didn't believe they grow like weeds here."

If it was supposed to be a distraction it failed, only serving to remind her that her parents wouldn't be here this Christmas.

"Ignore me," she told him. "It's my hormones. And it's so hot."

He led her inside and shut the sliding doors and switched on the AC. "There. Nice and chilly."

Erin suspected that her husband, raised his whole life in the sun, thought all cold was the same. She could never fully explain the thrill of a frosty morning. But she appreciated his efforts to understand.

"I got a tree!" he said suddenly.

Christmas trees weren't unheard of in Mexico, but they were expensive.

"Oh, Miguel, it's gorgeous!" There was also a piñata in the shape of a donkey standing beside the door, but the tree grabbed all her attention.

He smiled, pleased. "Artificial I'm afraid. Shall we decorate it?"

When her parents visited last Christmas, Mum had brought a box of Erin's favourite decorations. Last year they hadn't had a tree, so Erin had cheerfully dangled them from the potted cacti on the patio. Now, carefully unwrapping each bauble brought floods of happy memories and she grew calmer.

"Look," she said, holding up a misshapen blob. "I made this!"

"I sincerely hope our child has more talent!"

His teasing was exactly what she needed. She unpacked a

piece of plastic mistletoe and held it above her head, pursing her lips for a kiss. "Sorry to be such a moan."

"Moan all you like. I love your stories. And I love that our child will share two cultures."

Over the next few days, the Christmas cards from home began to roll in. Erin's friends and family had gone overboard with robins, snowmen and sleighs. In Mexico, cards tended towards the religious and these snowy scenes intrigued Miguel's family, especially the children. Of course the kids had seen snow on TV, and watched *Elf* re-runs until the adults begged for mercy, but when her nieces and nephews asked Erin about snowball fights, she struggled to explain the white stuff to people who had never experienced it.

How could she convey the sheer excitement of waking on a winter's morning and knowing

her and pulled a woolly hat over her ears. "Now, close your eyes."

He led her through the house. Erin heard him open a door and a blast of warm night air hit her.

"Put your shoes on." He guided her feet into sandals, then led her carefully down the garden. "Open your eyes!" he said triumphantly.

She did, and blinked. A circle had been made in the sand with pots of poinsettias, each one sprinkled with glitter. Fairy lights festooned the trunks of the nearest palm trees. Everywhere, candles flickered. Miguel had manhandled the tree out into the garden while she slept. In the centre of the circle stood a sand 'snowman', complete with hat and scarf. Instead of coal, he had glowing pink shells for eyes, and a piece of driftwood served as a walking stick.

The silvery white sand was like snow in the moonlight. Miguel pressed a button and Bing Crosby crooned the old familiar song as Erin laughed in delight. Miguel had placed two English seaside deckchairs beside the snowman, facing the waves, and he helped her lower her bulk into one. Then he vanished into the house. Erin looked around in wonder, touched by the effort and planning he had put into this. He returned carrying steaming mugs.

"Hot chocolate," he said. "Something Mexico does best. If the Swiss quibble about that, tell them to speak to the Aztecs."

Was that anxiety in his voice? Erin reached for his hand but he skipped away. "Not quite done." He came back a moment later with a plate of mince pies. "Your mother's recipe, my mother's cooking," he said proudly. "Sorry I can't do anything about the temperature," he said.

"It's just perfect," she assured him, sweating gently in her woolly hat and gloves. "Snow isn't all that great," she confided after a while. "Sometimes, we would stay out so long, our fingers and toes turned blue. Then we'd come in and sit by the fire and they'd hurt so much, we cried."

"Sounds like fun," said Miguel dryly.

"It mostly was." She sighed

and wiggled her toes in the sand. "But so is this."

A little while later, Miguel rose to his feet. "I'll make us breakfast before it gets too hot for you to sit out."

Alone, Erin carefully lowered her bulk down onto the sand. Lying on her back, she began to move her arms and legs, making a 'snow' angel as the stars gradually faded in the sky above.

Soon she would call her family and wish them a Merry Christmas. Later, she'd have a relaxed Christmas dinner with her new family, eaten outdoors around a huge table, under a pergola dripping with flowers, while very excited children raced around.

Her baby kicked, presumably objecting to her inactivity, making her smile. Early in her pregnancy she'd thought she'd never get over her morning sickness, but of course she had. Now, she could look back and see it had been no more than a stepping stone to something exciting and wonderful.

Just like her homesickness.

She thought guiltily of the donkey piñata still sitting by the door. For weeks, she had bemoaned the Christmas she was missing. But what about Miguel's Christmas? He'd done all this, even tracked down a tree for her, skipping his own family traditions in his efforts to replicate hers.

"You did all this just to make me happy," she murmured, hearing Miguel return. She held out her hands and he helped her to her feet. His dark eyes shone with love. "I'll always do my best to make you happy. You must know that."

Erin did. She wrapped her arms around him and settled her head on his chest, feeling his heat and the steady beat of his heart against her cheek. "Over breakfast, you can tell me who will be at your parents' house later and what to expect. And then I think you'd better fill me in on the fate of the piñata."

The piñata's future didn't look good, she suspected.

Whereas Erin's burned as bright as the Mexican sun.

THE END

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“
*Fairy lights
festooned the
trunks of the
nearest palm
trees*”

from the quality of the light and the stillness that something wonderful had happened? She told them how she would leap out of bed and gaze in wonder at the vast, silent blanket stretching over the fields. Then dress and race downstairs, not even pausing for breakfast in the race to be first to make her mark on the pristine layer.

"I'll take you sledging one day," she promised her unborn child. "And you can come back and explain it to your cousins."

On Christmas Eve, it was still dark when Miguel shook her awake. "Come on, sleepy head, time to get up."

"What time is it?"

"Didn't you tell me you always get up at three o'clock on Christmas morning? Put these on." He thrust a pair of gloves at

Stones

The kids round here obviously thought it was funny, leaving their stupid stones on Joe's front wall.

He knew what they were up to, lining them up ready to throw at his windows when he wasn't paying attention. It was terrifying how far out of control kids were these days. It wasn't like it when he was a kid. Start throwing stones at anyone and you'd get a clip round the ear.

His kids wouldn't have dared do it either, if he'd had any, but he and Gill weren't blessed and, by the time she died a couple of years ago, it was too late.

They'd never given up hoping for a miracle. "People have surprise babies in their 40s," they were told. "It can still happen."

When she turned 50, something else was growing in her womb and by the time they realised what it was, it was too late. It had spread too far.

He snatched up the stones and took them indoors, putting them with all the others he'd saved since summer. Just to add insult to injury, they drew patterns and pictures on them and wrote silly slogans like, *Always be kind*. Evil little beasts. They probably thought they were hilarious, getting at the grumpy guy.

In summer, the pictures had been of ice creams and clowns and towards autumn, they turned to pumpkins and witches. Now, they had a Christmas theme with snowmen and Santas. It was as if they were taunting him, as if everyone knew that he was alone.

He closed his curtains, shutting out the Christmas lights in the street, and settled down for the evening. After Gill died, he shunned their friends, pushing them away with their hearty casseroles and well-

Stones had been left on his front wall for months now, decorated with pictures of ice creams or with annoying little slogans written on them. Why were they taunting him with them?

meaning attempts to get him to "join in". She had been his whole life, and now his life was meaningless without her.

He went to bed early, tossed and turned all night, then got up and went to work the next morning. When he got home, there were more stones on his wall. He almost felt like hurling them at his windows himself to save them the bother, except the windows were doubled-

haunted eyes. He was scared to look in the mirror these days for the misery he saw reflected there.

Carol singers came round later that evening. They stood on his front path, *Ding-dong Merrily On High-ing* and *Away In A Manger-ing*.

The vicar rattled a tin at him and Joe dug deep in his pocket for some change.

"Thank you and Merry

“Every Christmas for as long as he could remember, Gill had made a donation”

glazed and probably wouldn't break anyway. One of the stones had a crude little scene painted on it of a baby with an angel looming over it. Another had a Christmas tree with presents piled beneath. It was like having salt rubbed into a wound.

This time last year, Gill had been in the hospice and Christmas passed by in a blur. He'd had an invitation from friends tucked inside a Christmas card. *When you're ready*, they wrote. *We're here for you. There'll be a place for you at our table on Christmas Day.*

As if anyone would want him lurking around, spoiling their festivities with his sorrowful,

Christmas," the vicar said. "We're collecting this year for the foodbank. We're also asking people to fill a shoebox with some gifts for a child. Just drop it in at the foodbank with a label on, saying what age group it's suitable for."

He was about to shut the door when he saw one of the choristers placing a stone on his front path. "Oi, what do you think you're doing?"

"It's just a stone," the vicar said.

"But it's not just a stone," Joe snarled. "They've been tormenting me for months." His hand swooped down and scooped it up. *Peace On Earth*

it said on one side. On the other was a shining star.

"It's just the stones thing," the vicar said. "Everyone's doing it, adults and children alike."

Joe looked puzzled, so the vicar carried on, "They decorate stones with pens, paints or even nail varnish, then leave them for someone to find. When they're found, pictures are posted on Facebook. The children get a thrill seeing when their stones have been found."

"You mean it's all harmless? A bit of fun?" Joe thought guiltily of the box full of stones in his kitchen and all the children who might be disappointed that theirs hadn't been discovered.

Every Christmas for as long as he could remember, Gill had made a donation to a children's charity.

"It's what we would have spent on presents for our children, if we'd had any," she used to say.

She was such a generous soul. What on earth would she think of what he'd become?

When the carol singers had gone, he pulled on his coat and set off with the box of stones. He walked round the town for hours, finding places to leave them. As the box got lighter, so did his spirits. It was almost as if Gill was walking along beside him, and he fancied he could hear the click of her heels.

Gill loved her shoes. She stored them in their original boxes wrapped in tissue paper. She'd think he was daft, hanging on to them. Maybe it was time to take them to the charity shop. He smiled. First, he'd take them out of the boxes.

When he'd been to the charity shop, he went shopping, buying pens and paints along with small toys, books and bags of chocolate coins. He filled Gill's shoe boxes for children of all ages, from babies to teenagers, and when he'd finished, he took them along to the foodbank.

On Christmas Day, he went to visit his friends to deliver gifts.

"I won't stay," he said, but they drew him into the warmth of their home.

"Of course you will, Joe," they said. So he did.

THE END

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'I've just had my 80th novel published!'

Anna Jacobs reveals the secrets of her success to Sue Cooke

How did you become a novelist?

I think I was born with stories in my head. By the time I was two, I'd invented imaginary friends and, ever since, I've had stories of people wandering around my head. I emigrated to Australia in 1973 and I got serious about writing after Georgette Heyer died in 1974. She was my favourite author and did the most brilliant characters. I thought I couldn't live without lovely stories like hers, so I decided to write my own. First, I did a history course on the period 1730 to 1950, and I've kept within those boundaries, apart from my modern novels. I had my first novel accepted in 1991, after I entered a competition and came second out of 800. I won A\$10,000 and publication. I cried with happiness, but a year after that, the publisher told me they didn't want me any more, and then I came down with chronic fatigue syndrome. But I kept writing and the next year I got six novels accepted for publication. Now, I've just had my 80th novel published. Sometimes I think, 'Where do I get all the stories?' but they just come. My readers are delightful

and I love to give people pleasure and touch lives.

Where do you get your ideas for plots?

I think the imagination is like a muscle — the more you use it, the better it gets. I get ideas from watching people and reading, especially amateur biographies. They give you such a true picture of everyday life.

— “ —
I want to write about women who hold the family together

When I started writing, historians had mainly written the men's history and there wasn't a lot about ordinary women. My grandma was one of 12 kids and, of those, the 10 women were all the dominant ones in their households — the men did as they were told. I was trying to set the record straight.

Where do you get your ideas for characters?

I think they walk in from some magic place and sit down in my

head. They're so real. I'm writing about strong, sensible women and I also write about older women. Women over 60 are sidelined in books. I want to write about women who hold the family together or who make a good partnership with a strong man. That's what I have in my own life. I've been married for 55 years to my best friend.

Which of your characters is your favourite?

It's Bram, the main character in a series called *The Traders*, set in Western Australia and England in the 1860s and 1870s. He's Irish, not good looking, not well educated, but he's the most gorgeous man. There are five books in the series and he's in the centre of every one. He is a loving man, like my husband.

Which book have you most enjoyed writing?

One of my early books, written as Shannah Jay. It's called *Envoy* and it's a science fiction, thriller romance. I wrote several fantasy novels before I settled into historical novels, and I wrote *Envoy* to learn how to do tension. There are all sorts of

twists and turns, and characters stabbing each other in the back on this strange planet.

Which fictional character do you wish you'd created?

Ferdie Fakenham, a minor character in *Friday's Child* by Georgette Heyer, is so funny. He's a real idiot, rich but a bit thick. I learned so much from how vivid he was.

Which author has inspired you the most?

As well as Georgette Heyer, there's C. J. Cherryh. She writes fantasy novels. She's written a series that's 18 books long and still going. She does such clever twists and turns.

What is your all-time favourite book?

I haven't got just one, but there are a few I re-read a lot. One is *Kelly Park*, by Jean Stubbs. Another is *Born In Fire* by Nora Roberts. I re-read them every few years just for the pleasure of it. They hang together perfectly, there are vivid characters and lovely stories, and new details you see at every turn.



Anna Jacobs' book *Saffron Lane* (Allison & Busby, £19.99) is out now, along with *A Time For Hope* (Allison & Busby, £7.99).

5:2

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